

FUTURE

combined with **SCIENCE FICTION** *stories*

INCOMPLETE SUPERMAN

FEATURE NOVEL
by Poul Anderson

AGE OF PROPHECY

FEATURE NOVEL

by Margaret
St. Clair

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BRITISH
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EDITION

A
DOUBLE-ACTION
MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES
BRAND NEW





"Rot!"

—says

CHARLES ATLAS

"I'll Prove in the first 7 days YOU can have a Body like Mine!"

DON'T get the idea that it takes a lot of time and hard work for you to get smashing strength and powerful muscles. That idea is all rot—and I have proved it. All I need is just 7 days to prove what I can do for you. My marvellous muscle-building system—"DYNAMIC TENSION" will give you just what you want. And I don't need any gadgets either: nor have I any use for apparatus.

DYNAMIC TENSION IS ALL I NEED

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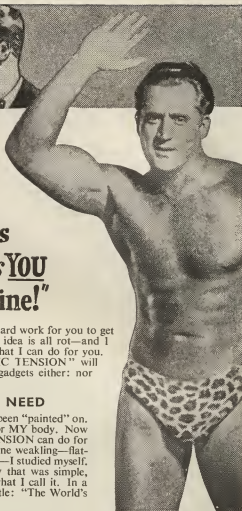
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(DEPT. 141/X), 2, DEAN STREET,
LONDON, W.1.

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Name
(Please print or write plainly.)

Address



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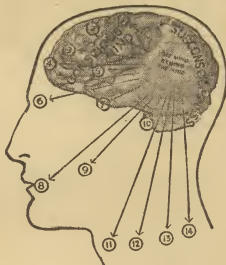
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**CHARLES ATLAS (DEPT. 141/X),
2, DEAN STREET, LONDON, W.1.**

Inferiority Complex eradicated for ever

AN Inferiority Complex is a disturbance in the Subconscious Mind which manifests itself in self-consciousness and lack of confidence—in nervousness and “nervyness”—in causeless worry—in depression and a sense of futility—in lassitude and lack of enterprise—in nerve pains and other ailments—in weakness of will and habits—in stuttering, blushing, and nervous mannerisms—in forgetfulness and lack of concentration. These are symptoms of “something wrong” within your personality which you can put right—the effect of conflicting forces within yourself or the result of some emotional experience or some destructive influence during your personality development. Such experiences may be entirely forgotten, they may have acted too early for your memory to retain, but their effects remain in the form of a disturbance centre in Subconsciousness which send out powerful negative impulses, overcoming and paralysing your positive impulses, denying you the pleasures of achievement and the joys of living.

You cannot control these impulses—to attempt to fight them by direct effort only serves to increase their strength—but “you can remove them altogether by eradicating from your Subconscious Mind the trouble from which they spring, building up in their place powerful positive impulses, generating forces within yourself which will help instead of hinder, which will carry you forward toward a happier, healthier, fuller, more successful life.” This you can do—yourself—simply by your own efforts, in the privacy of your own home.



Key to imaginary diagram depicting the effect of the subconscious mind on the personality and bodily structure.

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 Self consciousness
Lack of self-confidence | 6 Unsteady gaze
Shifting eyes |
| 2 Unsociability
Nervous
Apprehension
Anxiety | 7 Nervous
Catarrh |
| 3 Depression
Worry
Sleeplessness
Nerves | 8 Stammering |
| 4 Weak will
Indecision
Habits | 9 Blushing |
| 5 Forgetfulness
Lack of Concentration | 10 Obsessions |
| | 11 Trembling limbs |
| | 12 Neurasthenia
Nerve pains |
| | 13 Functional disorders |
| | 14 Physical lethargy |

Write to-day for FREE BOOK “I Can . . . and I Will”

BRITISH INSTITUTE OF PRACTICAL PSYCHOLOGY

10A (W.O.3), Highbury Place, London, E.5

All correspondence is confidential

FUTURE

combined with **SCIENCE FICTION** *stories*

Robert W.
Lowndes,
Editor

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- IMITATION OF DEATH** Lester del Rey 77
Max Fleigh believes himself the master of synthetic men — duplicates of real people who will act as he commands. But more than one side can play chess with such puppets!

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Your Nose is reshaped while you sleep, with the Nose-Molder. Cor-rects every type. Money back guarantee. 6/6. Red, shiny nose, black heads, pimples, acne, blemishes or money back. Amazing herbal cream 3/6. Freckles positively re-moved with new Anti-Freckle Cream. Guaranteed safe. 3/6. Sent under plain cover.

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New discovery builds robust muscular physique, sound nerves, abounding vitality. **Beautifon Vitamin Tablets** are natural body-builders, containing 14 "Sunshine Vitamin," nourishing and revitalising harmonolous, milk and pure yeast. They develop bodibulk, life magic, give wonderful vim and vigour. "Have increased nearly a stone. My nerves are all right now."—J.H., Kings Lynn. "I feel a different man. My weight has now increased 18 lbs."—J.C.F. No harmful chemicals. For both sexes. Given by Doctors. Hundreds of testimonials. Money back if not delighted in 7 days. Booklet 2d. 50 Tablets 4/6; 200 (10 course) 12/6, post free. ONLY from **DIRECT-FROM-NATURE PREPARATIONS, 23 (TPL 8) Dean Road London, N.W.2. (Established 1928)**

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RADIANT VITALITY for Every Man and Every Woman!

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YOU CAN HAVE YOUR TIME OVER AGAIN—SCIENCE HAS PROVED IT.

HAVEN'T YOU OFTEN WISHED YOU COULD REALLY LIVE? WITH THE BOUNDLESS ENERGY TO ENJOY LIFE TO THE FULL, TO BE FILLED WITH HAPPINESS EVERY MOMENT FOR THE SHEER JOY OF LIVING? THERE IS ECSTASY INDEED! AND IT DOES EXIST!—IT DOES EXIST TO-DAY AS THE RARE PRIVILEGE OF THOSE FORTUNATE FEW (PERHAPS ONE IN TEN THOUSAND) WHO ENJOY REAL, POSITIVE, PERFECT HEALTH.

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From the moment you were born until the moment you die, every bodily activity is controlled by your ENDOCRINE or DUCTLESS GLANDS. Each evolves its special potent substances, the HORMONES—and their presence in, or absence from, your blood, determines what you are or what you become. Your height, your build, whether you are fat or lean, active or inactive, energetic or weak, clever or dull—your physical and mental life is wholly determined by your GLANDULAR activity.

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It is a lamentable fact, but none the less true, that the vast majority of people living to-day do not know what health is, because they have never been healthy. Many of them imagine that they are healthy as long as they have no definite disease or illness. This is far from being the case! That is merely Negative Health. No one could ever confuse it with Positive Health who has once experienced the latter! Positive Health is not merely the absence of illness or disease, and those processes that wear out and destroy the bodily tissues; it is the active presence of a 100 per cent. efficient endocrine co-ordination, which daily rejuvenates and renews the tissues. It fills the body at all times with a boundless reserve of energy that makes itself known by a delightful feeling of slight tension—a feeling of being "wound-up," instantly ready to go anywhere and tackle anything! This sensation of exhilarating vitality indicates the presence of untiring strength and radiant health which will outlast the passage of the years. People who have this Positive Health do not age as others do, but seem to remain perpetually young and vital. They are, by the accident of chance, the lucky possessors of perfect endocrine co-ordination. Now this glorious health and happiness can be YOURS!

GLANDULAR Treatment automatically normalises endocrine function, eliminates endocrine imbalance and secures perfect endocrine co-ordination! That means 100 per cent. Perfect Positive Health for YOU!



If GLANDULAR Treatment can do THIS for a man of 76, what can it do for YOU?

Read this extraordinary story:

"At 65 I was a decrepit old man with no trace left of my youthful vigour. My body was senile, what hair I had was white, my skin was yellow, wrinkled, dry, my eyes were dull and lacking colour—my senility was distressing. I was an old crock with one foot in the grave.

"Then came the great change. I heard of British Glandular Products Ltd., and took their 'TESTRONES' Tablets. In a few weeks I was a new man!

"To-day I have, at 76, more vim and vigour than I had at 30, my incredible vitality astonishes even me. I eat like a boy and sleep like a child, I read small print without glasses.

"Once again, at 76, I am experiencing the joys of life to the full.

"(Signed) Digby H. de Burgh,
Port Washington, British Columbia."

The second of the two pictures reproduced above represents Mr. de Burgh as he is to-day in his eightieth year.

Answer these Questions

ARE YOU AS STRONG AND VITAL AS YOU COULD WISH?

ARE YOU BECOMING STRONGER AND HEALTHIER, HOLDING YOUR OWN, OR DECLINING?

DO YOU SUFFER FROM LACK OF ENERGY?

ARE YOU QUICKLY FATIGUED?

NEVER REALLY WELL?

ARE YOU RUN DOWN, EXHAUSTED, OR OVERWORKED?

HAVE YOU SUFFERED FROM NEURASTHENIA OR NERVE STRAIN?

ARE YOU "NERVY" IN YOUR DAILY LIFE?

ARE YOU IMPATIENT, A WORRIER, EASILY UPSET?

HAVE YOU SUFFERED LOSS OF WEAKNESS OF YOUR VITAL POWERS?

GLANDULAR TREATMENT CAN PUT MATTERS RIGHT. IT IS BASED NOT UPON THEORY BUT UPON ASCERTAINED SCIENTIFIC FACT!

How to find out more about it!

British Glandular Products Ltd. have specialised in the supply of Glandular and Hormone extracts since 1929, and their "TESTRONES" Tablets for the male sex, and "OVERONES" Tablets for the female sex, have brought untold benefits to countless numbers of people of both sexes and ALL ages for many years past.

There is no need for complicated expensive treatments—our easily assimilable gland extracts in tablet form will in a short while have a revolutionary effect on your general health and vitality.

Fill in coupon below and enclose 3d. stamp for booklet—"The Essence of Life"—giving you further particulars of these remarkable treatments—or send 12s. 6d. for trial bottle of 100 Male or 100 Female Gland Tablets, which will give you that radiant vitality and maximum efficiency, which alone makes life worth living.

TO BRITISH GLANDULAR PRODUCTS LTD. (Dept. TPM. 506), 37 CHESHAM PLACE, LONDON, S.W.1
Please send free Booklet—"The Essence of Life," a 3d. stamp is enclosed—OR Please send to following address:

(a) 100 "TESTRONES" Tablets (Male); (b) 100 "OVERONES" Tablets (Female), for which I enclose 12s. 6d. herewith.

(Please write in BLOCK LETTERS and STRIKE OUT tablets NOT required.)

NAME

ADDRESS

HOW MUCH OF YOUR WAGE PACKET



ends in Smoke?

CONQUER THE CRAVING EASILY
QUICKLY WITH THE "APAL"
AID OF **APAL**

One of the first effects of conquering the smoking habit is that you realise you have more money in your pocket to spend on more vital things. Next, you notice a marked improvement in your health. The remedy for the tobacco habit is in your hands. With the aid of "APAL"—the imitation cigarette which you never light—you can stop smoking immediately, because inside the "APAL" is a crystallised compound. When you draw on it you get a pleasant, cool taste on your palate that satisfies the desire and eliminates the craving for a smoke.

READ WHAT USERS OF "APAL" SAY

Dear Sirs,

My reaction is, that since I had my APAL two months ago, I have not had one cigarette, and I am now free of the smoking habit, I never think about them now.

F. H., Mansfield, Notts.

Dear Sirs,

This is my third week without a cigarette, thanks to APAL. I definitely feel that the battle has been won. I was an exceptionally heavy smoker, and was very doubtful if you could cure me. I suffer extremely with stomach trouble, but since giving up smoking my health with regards to this complaint has improved enormously.

Mrs. A. D. R., Stanmore, Middx.

Dear Sirs,

About five or six weeks ago I wrote to you asking for an APAL which I received almost immediately afterwards. It is an amazing cure because it makes one hate the taste and smell of a cigarette. I had a cigarette a week after I had been using it a week, but threw it away after two draws as the taste was repulsive to me.

O. A. E., Lytham, Lancs.

Dear Sirs,

I promised I would let you know how my son is progressing with the APAL. It is now five months since he received it, and he has not smoked since. He can be among lots of pals who are smoking and it has no effect whatsoever upon him.

S. H., Aberdare.

Dear Sirs,

I thank you very much indeed for your wonderful cure of smoking. APAL did in one week what I have tried to do for years.

D. G. D., Ebbw Vale, Mon.

Dear Sir,

I had my APAL three weeks ago, and since then I have not wanted to smoke. My friend saw mine and now wants me to write and get one for him.

S. K., West Kingsdown, Kent.

Dear Sir,

I am very pleased with the APAL. I am down from 20 cigarettes to one per day. I did not believe in it at first, it was my husband who insisted I send for one, and I am very glad I did, it is really marvellous.

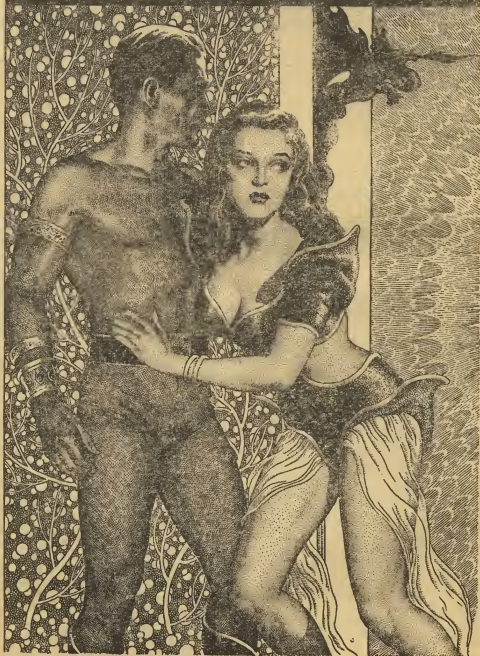
Mrs. E. G. H., New Cross, S.E. 14.

Send a stamped and addressed envelope for full particulars, free advice, and proof:

HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

(Room 133), 243, HIGH HOLBORN, LONDON, W.C.1

INCOMPLETE



SUPERMAN



"Please don't go in, Will," she whispered.

"We want our place in the sun, but it isn't only Man who is holding us back; there's another power as strong as we are."

THE MAN said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Kennedy; I know it's unethical, and I wouldn't ever play such a trick on you myself. But it's orders."

"Whose orders?"

"I got them from the sales chief.

Don't ask me where *he* got them." The man leaned forward, so that his face seemed almost to project from the visiscreen, "If you want my private guess, Mr. Kennedy, the government bought those parts. Want them for some top secret project."

FEATURE NOVEL by Poul Anderson

"You don't *know* who got them?"

"No. Nor did my boss, when I asked him. It's just orders from higher up. And who swings that much influence, except the government?"

I could name a few— "What chance is there of our getting them later?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. I gather all of our production of those particular items will be going to this unidentified client."

"You couldn't find out who it is? Maybe we could make a deal with them."

The man looked frightened. "It'd cost me my job if I got nosy."

"Perhaps we could find you a better job with our outfit."

"No!"

"Well—never mind, then. If necessary, we can always make the parts ourselves."

"I'm really very sorry about all this. Murchison Laboratories has been one of our best clients. We hate to disappoint you this way. Hope you won't hold it against us in future purchases—"

"Of course not." *Like hell we won't! We can't make further use of that company—not when it too has come under their control.*

Presently the man ended the conversation and the screen went dark. For a moment the being who called himself Will Kennedy sat alone in his office, thinking.

So Murchison Labs wouldn't get it's electronic parts. This had been the last source of supply for such delicate and unusual apparatus—all the others had been taken over, one by one, and on some or other pretext had quit selling anything to Murchison which couldn't be obtained from any ordinary source. Now this one, too—the secret research would be held up indefinitely while Kennedy got his plant organized to manufacture all its own needs.

Except that that wasn't the worst of it. If *they* simply happened to be engaged in some parallel work, had merely beaten out the supermen in the course of normal competition for scarce material, it didn't matter.

They might even have thought that the various projects they nullified were being carried on by humans, and had throttled them as undesirable. The supermen themselves had had occasion to do that to humans.

In either case, the thing to do was to affect a rapprochement, convince them of their incredible error, and join forces.

But more and more the conflict didn't look accidental. There was too much interference, all along the line, for all of it to be due to chance collisions with *their* unknown purposes. If they were so thoroughly aware of what the supermen were doing, how could they be ignorant of the nature of the workers? And if they knew that, they would only remain hidden if they were hostile!

And in that case—

It was high time for another meeting of the Council.

KENNEDY got up, a tall lean dark-haired man with a deep inward bitterness far behind his eyes, and put on his coat. He had to go home to call the others; the special circuit was there, and it was about quitting time anyway.

Old Tom Murchison hailed him as he left the office. "What luck, Will?"

"None," shrugged Kennedy. "Somebody's got in ahead of us and contracted for their entire output. I couldn't find out whom. May be the government, working on something secret." He might as well let the old man think that. "Looks like we'll just have to start making our own stuff."

"That's a mighty big investment, especially in something so long-range as this subelectronic generator—when you're not even sure it'll work!"

"Research is what keeps us ahead, chief," said Kennedy. "You founded these labs to do nothing but research. There's no point in sticking to petty industrial problems. We don't want to be just glorified consultants; this is a chance to get in on the ground floor of something as fundamental and important as atomic energy.

The old scientist nodded. "You're right, of course—as usual. Okay, I'll see if I can't dig up a spare million dollars or two for you to play with."

"We'll get it back tenfold in five or ten years."

"Maybe. At least—it'll be fun!" The faded blue eyes twinkled.

"Sure. Well, goodnight, chief." Kennedy paused. "I might not be around tomorrow. I'd like to see a chap in Seattle sometime soon; he had some interesting ideas that I think we can use."

"No need to tell me, Will. You know you've got a free hand here. Goodnight."

The superman walked out onto the gravelled driveway. The early winter dusk had fallen, and snow was drifting softly out of a lowering sky. He was alone in a world of white and gray and gathering darkness.

The faint pulse of life tingled in his nerves. He could sense the impulses of men in the building behind him, a little ragged now with weariness at the end of the day. A deeper subliminal current came from the town ahead, smoothed and muted by distance, the life forces of several thousand humans going about their business. A different pattern came briefly near, a dog loping through the snow. He felt the sudden tension as it sensed him. Few dogs liked a superman, they could smell a subtle difference.

He caught the fragment of a thought, some human's unsystematic rambling:—*not time tomorrow and dentist bill and straight up and*—It faded back into the formless swirling of nervous energy.

Telepathy—but maddeningly incomplete, unreliable, brief flashes of clear reception and then darkness again. It was a sense the supermen should have had, but it was rudimentary in those few who possessed it at all. Even as psychosomatic control was imperfect, as the endocrine system still wasn't much better than man's, as—

The incomplete superman. Evolution, he supposed, would in time have produced perfection of all that

of which the present generation had only the beginnings. Only there wasn't going to be any evolution; there wouldn't be any future generations.

The supermen were sterile.

H E FOUND his car and sent it whispering along the street toward his house. Thought filled his brain, the enormous logic of a brain with an I.Q. of 250—not that I.Q. meant much when it got that high—thought only partially translatable into human terms. It was swift, that thought—hard, cold, and rapid as lightning flickering in a summer night; it held to its purpose without wandering; and it integrated more factors than a human brain could ever handle at once.

He knew of the interference with his own work and with some of the projects carried on by others of his species; he had bits of information hinting at trouble in almost every field. But it wasn't coordinated and there wasn't enough of it. More important, no decision had been made as to what should be done about it.

Definitely, the Council would have to meet.

Snow whirled blindly in the beam of his headlights. The rising wind seemed to hoot at him. It had been wandering the earth before man rose up on two feet and took the wind in his face; it would still be wandering when man was in his grave.

Man—and susperman.

Why do we bother? There's no real hope for us. We're doomed, we'll go down into oblivion and be forgotten—unless—

Unless! We may be able to overcome the sterility, somehow. And meanwhile, supermen are being born to human mothers, there's always a new generation of sorts. He had a brief vision of a world controlled by his species, with a few select humans left as slaves and breeding stock. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

The house loomed before him. He slid the car into the garage and got out.

As he entered, the music met him, and he scowled in annoyance. Anna

was composing again. There wasn't time.

But it held him, regardless. This was music for a superman, music such as no human had ever imagined; there were the tones above and below audibility, shivering along his sensitive nerves, raising his hackles with the return of old forgotten instincts, blowing a wind upon him as if he looked into the cold depths of space itself.

It was stark, that music. It was an underground river flowing through lightless caverns with blind fish swimming past ice floes, it was a wind howling over empty moors; it was the mad dance of witches on the Brocken; the cold glass-smooth brain of a creature older than the universe and a wild beast stirring to life and flexing its claws down in the darkness of his subconscious. It laughed and sneered and roared at him; it flickered with little cold flames, it danced and mocked and lured. It was Anna's.

She heard him enter and her long fingers paused over the multiplex. The music snarled into silence, but it took a minute before the effects died within him, before the room seemed real again.

"Like it?" she asked. "*Symphonie Diabolique*."

"It's good," said Kennedy. "It's appropriate for us, isn't it?" He smiled wryly. "From the human viewpoint, I mean. We are the old Enemy, you know, the unhuman being that walks in darkness and strives for possession of man's world. We even deal in human souls, in a way." He shrugged. "Enough of that. There's more urgent business at hand."

They did not speak to each other in those words. Supermen never did, except in the presence of humans—it wasn't necessary. A phrase, a gesture, even a silence in the right place, could convey enough information for one of those minds instantly to grasp the whole. And that whole was not entirely expressible in human terms, it involved formulations found in no language of *homo sapiens* because no human brain could really comprehend them. An

integrated totality, a trans-sensory visualization, a probability manifold—clumsy words, barely hinting at the immensity events behind them.

How would you explain tensor analysis to a chimpanzee?

But roughly, supermen's thoughts and words could be rendered in human terms. Their intelligence, in the ordinary sense, was not fantastically far above that of *homo sapiens*—a few humans had even gotten that high, been as bright as a mediocre superman. It was the extra components of their minds which made the essential difference, abilities possessed, if at all, only in the most rudimentary and distorted form by humans; and this difference, rather than the greater powers of sheer memory and reason, was what made comparison between the intellects of man and superman meaningless.

ANNA GOT up and came over to him. She was tall and gaunt like himself, like most others of their species, and a human would not consider her beautiful—nor, for that matter, did Kennedy. But there was a fascination in her white skin and slant blue eyes and the aureole of frosty-gold hair about her high-cheeked face. You couldn't hide that tremendous personality; it blazed from both of them with almost a physical force. No matter how inconspicuous a superman tried to be, he remained the sort whom humans automatically obeyed.

Like old Murchison, for instance. The scientist knew nothing about Kennedy except that he was a brilliant young physicist and administrator. Technically, he was no more than the owner's chief assistant, vice president of the firm and director of research. Murchison himself wasn't aware of it, but Kennedy ran the place. Which suited the superman—most of his breed preferred to be the power behind the throne, to have a human figurehead.

Partly it was sheer ability which got a superman into a key position. Partly it was the overwhelming, unstoppable personality. Partly it was semitelepathic control—not complete, for *homo superior* didn't have

the senses or the projective ability except as a weak embryo of something that would never develop fully, but sufficient. A damping of certain impulses, an insertion of certain others—that was enough.

"There's trouble," said Anna. "Someone else has blocked off your supplies again."

Kennedy nodded. "The same parties, no doubt, who've been balking me for the past three years. It begins to look very much as if someone doesn't want us to do work in subelectronics. And that's a matter for the Council."

He went over to the house visiphone. Ostensibly it was an ordinary instrument, but he had built subelectronic circuits into it. No human would ever detect his calls to the Councillors.

No human.

Anna turned back to her multiplex, but didn't play it while he called. Her eyes grew dreamy; she was composing in her head now, a silent immensity of tones sliding through her brain and singing deep in her nerves.

Artists were as much in demand as scientists and administrators among the supermen. They were starved for expression suitable to themselves. Human works were all trivial, and not entirely comprehensible to a race with radically different emotional patterns. *The Symphonie Diabolique* would be—appreciated. She smiled, a slow secret curving of chiseled lips.

Kennedy's set sputtered and whined with interference. He didn't know enough about the huge new field of subelectronics to eliminate it, or even be very sure of its cause. Perhaps the motion of the planets themselves, varying gravitational fields through the Solar System, had something to do with it. The processes involved were perhaps the most fundamental of the physical universe.

He got a dozen of the twenty-odd present members of the Council. The rest could be contacted soon enough. They shifted into the artificial language they had developed, but Kennedy didn't trust it any more. If

the unknowns were listening in—well, even such a code could be broken.

"I think we should meet physically, at Rendezvous Number Ten," he said. "That way we'll be safe from spies."

"They might possibly trace us and find out where we are," objected Li Wang from Canton.

"Quite so. But it won't do them much good; they won't be able to listen in on us."

"Very well." The agreement went around the world, a few muttered syllables on the whispering beam "Midnight tomorrow, then; ten's local time."

KENNEDY turned off his set and looked back to Anna. "So much for that," he said. "I'll start tomorrow and follow an evasive path, just in case someone is trying to shadow us."

"We will," she corrected.

"But—don't be a fool! Someone has to stay here. Leaving the house unguarded would be an invitation for them to come in and see what—"

"Let them. If they know enough to search this place, they won't learn anything else by spying here. All you have lying about are some notes on subelectronics, and you said yourself you think they know as much about that as you do—or maybe more."

Kennedy scowled. "Even so—"

"I'm going. I haven't seen anyone of the species except you for months now. You can bury yourself in the lab—I have to be polite to the humans that call and chatter—I've had about enough of it!" Anna's eyes flashed, cold and arrogant.

Kennedy shrugged. It wasn't much use arguing with her, and he didn't want her to leave him just yet.

Since there was no chance of propagating, most males and females of *homo superior* remained without ties. He thought wistfully that human love must be a wonderful thing, but it wasn't for his race. Respect, friendship, affection of a sort, yes—but they couldn't lose themselves in the wonder of another, no one else could become all the world to them.

Whether it was a basic trait of the highly intellectualized breed, love simply man's version of an animal passion that superman had left behind him, or whether it was related to their sterility, he didn't know.

The male and female *homo superior* usually had a succession of human mistresses or lovers—they were easy to deceive and dominate; they were convenient housekeepers or breadwinners and fronts in human society, leaving the superbeing free for other things. But he liked to have Anna around. He could talk to her.

"Very well," he said.

And it might be just as well, he reflected. She had an uncanny faculty for intuitive grasping at realities: she might be able to make valuable suggestions. And they'd need all the help they could get.

Snow whirled against the windows. He felt a sudden immense loneliness. The supermen were so few, so few, in a world of two-legged beasts. And somewhere out in that night lay their unknown enemy.



KENNEDY'S plane looked like an ordinary human vehicle, but he had installed modifications. As soon as he was well out of sight from the town he sealed the cabin, went up into the stratosphere, and headed for the meeting place at a thousand miles an hour.

Earth slipped away far below him, green wonderful Earth, the only world in the Solar System where any of her children could really be at home. Unless they developed the faster-than-light spaceship for which some of them hoped, the supermen would have to stay here and slowly wring a place on the planet from man. Even if they did find means of going out among the stars, he wondered if they would care to abandon their birthplace.

Even supposing they did that, they would still have to keep con-

trol on Earth, make provision for the new supermen who would be born to human parents, see that the human race didn't have a chance to interfere.

A world of our own— Briefly, he wondered what it was like to be a man, to think oneself belonging on Earth, to walk freely beneath the sky and look up to the far planets and think, *This is ours*.

But man had hope, as a race, and superman did not. A world of *homo superior* would never know the laughter of children; there would only be age and death and oblivion. Unless—

But still we must control. The greater cannot remain subservient to the lesser, the very thought is intolerable. We need man, but we cannot bow to him. We don't want to enslave, but we must control, or all our purposes, which they cannot comprehend, will fall into dust.

Anna sat quietly, looking out into the stratospheric dusk with unseeing eyes. He wondered what chords and harmonies were streaming through her head.

Rendezvous Ten was simply an apartment building in Rio de Janeiro, owned by a Brazilian superman and inhabited by others of the race. Kennedy set his plane down on whispering jets into the fragrance of a roof garden. In the darkness around him, he saw the parked vehicles of the other Councillors, with more arriving. Below him, the lights of the city winked and blazed an answer to the swarming stars.

They went inside, to the room where the meeting was to be. The Councillors sat informally, conversing or lost in their own thoughts. To the outward eye, they were simply human beings, men and women of various races with little to distinguish them save the brilliant eyes and high sharp features. But inwardly—

Any superman who wished could sit in on such a meeting, and not few of the tenants had chosen to do so. But generally they were glad enough to delegate their mutual problems to the Council and be free to carry on their private affairs.

Kennedy nodded greetings, found a seat and a drink, and waited for the rest to arrive. It didn't take long. As the one who had called the meeting, he presided.

IT WAS A strange conference. They sat so quietly, all of them, and spoke only short phrases in their special language. A gesture, a nuance of expression, a few words here and there with a subtle shift in tone—but it was enough. Precise and tremendous, the meanings stood forth.

Kennedy described his frustrations through the latest one. He finished with what could be rendered into English as: "This merely clinches my conviction that someone is opposing the project. I would like to hear any other information any of you may have which bears on the subject."

"Question," said an African. "I've been in the Congo a long time, gotten out of touch with things, and also I'm not a scientist. Why is this subelectronic work of such practical importance to anyone? The humans already have some small knowledge of the phenomena, so it's not a monopoly of ours by any means. You'd expect them to work on it too."

"They do," said Kennedy. "But as yet they find it only an interesting theoretical problem. I've carried the mathematics farther than any human has—or ever can, with their present techniques—and I can assure you that the field is basic. It seems to underlie all physical processes and integrate them in some fashion. For instance, my work gives the best explanation to date of gyromagnetism. I think it will provide a basis for many developments, including the complete and controlled disintegration of matter and the building of a spaceship which can circumvent the light-speed barrier.

"Now obviously we can't allow humans to have that information, yet; I and certain of my associates are taking care of that. We'll see to it that we become the recognized authorities on subelectronics. The devices which I shall allow my osten-

sible employer to have, for instance, will apparently exhaust the possibilities of one branch of the field, though actually we will be getting certain much more powerful mechanisms which I can have made without anyone's realizing their true purpose. Thus most humans will listen to us when we tell them that further work in the field will be fruitless; and we have the usual means for discouraging any who persist in being curious. Very much the same means that are being used against me right now!

"The point is this: "No humans can be the opponents because none of them know about this work—at least, enough for them to have any conceivable reason, including simple competition for supplies, to hinder it. Even if that were the case, we would soon be able to track down the offenders and evade them. Humans simply can't hide their activities from us. But here all investigation has come to a dead end. It is always someone else who is responsible, who is putting on pressure here and there. I can't get a certain tube element because it's all being bought by another company, which wants it for someone else whose directors have decided on a line of research requiring that part because a bottleneck in production of something else makes them look for a substitute; and the bottleneck is due to a similar complex of interlocking causes...and so on as far as we can trace it.

"Sheer chance cannot account for it. I have been frustrated too many times, too thoroughly, and always with the same power and efficiency. Too many others of our race whom I know about have been having similar troubles. *Someone is out to stop us!*"

THEY TOOK that quietly, but the room seethed and crackled with nervous tension. Li Wang said slowly: "I have been having similar difficulties. As you know, we've been infiltrating the Chinese government for the past ten years. And bit by bit, as our men got higher and higher, there have been trou-

bles. Their orders are countermanded; underlings prove obstreperous; the execution of policies fail because of unforeseen and improbable factors. And certain other policies which we vigorously oppose are pushed through in spite of all our efforts. For instance, we wanted no action taken to develop the Yunnanese uranium strike. Humans have too much uranium to play with right now; moreover, it should be saved for *our* use later. Nevertheless, that uranium is being mined. I have not been able to find out where all of it is going. Somebody wants that uranium *now*."

They began to tell what they knew then, report after report of difficulty, failure, an opposition hidden by the sheer complexity of its organization. It would have seemed fantastic to a human. A few supermen could control a nation by holding the key posts—or better yet, by being the indispensable advisors of the men who held those jobs. A human mind could not grasp the totality of the gigantic fluid web which was society; to him, its sheer complexity dissolved into a chaos. A superman could; he would know precisely what button to push somewhere to effect, through an inexorable chain of events, a desired happening somewhere else.

So they could appreciate the fact that someone was following their own methods—and doing it more efficiently.

Even in the minds of men—Pierre Charmant said to them: "As much of you know, I am trying to produce a general trend in music which will influence human minds toward certain desired ends. You may not all be aware of the extent to which the mathematical theory of *homo sapiens* psychology has been worked out, but I assure you that our understanding is very precise. A different type of mentality enjoys, say, classical music from one that favors the latest cacophony; but conversely, the pervasive influence of one type of music will tend to mold a mind into the correspond-

ing pattern." He smiled at Anna. "Not for humans are your fiendish and beautiful compositions, my dear. We want them to have music that will make them soothed, amenable, easy-going. It won't do that all by itself, of course, but among many other influences it will help. In the course of a century or two—"

"And you've been having trouble," flashed Anna.

"Exactly. Other schools are rising. Valdurian's style is especially bad for our purposes. I've investigated his background. He is clear enough himself, but he seems to have been under strange influences in his past. We appeal to snobbery through the critics, we give concerts, buy radio time—but someone else is doing the same. *Someone* is very interested in promoting Valdurian."

"I've found writings here and there," said Professor Gunnarsson. "Obscure works for the most part, but bearing marks of not having been written by humans. And the philosophers and scientists and political theorists whom we sponsor are meeting unexpectedly vigorous opposition from certain quarters whose background I cannot exactly trace."

"I think that's enough," said Kennedy. "It's plain that there is some organization parallel to ours, apparently better set up and more thoroughly entrenched. They, too, want to manipulate and control man for their own purposes—which apparently conflict at important points with ours. They seem to have some awareness of us; just how much I do not know. They may suspect our true nature, or they may crack down on general principles. If, for instance, they don't want anyone not under their direct control to do subelectronic research, they'd try to stop me whether they knew I was a superman or not.

"The trouble is, we know nothing about them. They remain shadows; we encounter only their puppets."

THE PAUSE that followed was long by superman standards, while they turned the information

over in their minds, but it lasted only a second or two by chronological time. Then Hallmyer said thoughtfully: "The most obvious answer is that they are of our race but have built up a parallel organization without knowing about us. After all, we only began to realize our true nature and to band together about fifty years ago. We could easily have missed many of the race—we must have done so. If some of these went through a similar development, the two groups could be quite unaware of each other's existence—especially when each is trying to be as secretive as possible."

"By now they must begin to suspect the same about us that we think about them," said Charmant. "Why aren't they trying to contact us? There is no earthly reason for conflict within the race."

"Isn't there?" asked Gunnarsson. "I can imagine any number of possible reasons for a clash, including the hypothesis that these unknowns represent some sort of variant of the mutation and therefore do not belong to the race at all. Suppose they have some radically different purpose. We want simply to gain control of mankind's world. They may want something entirely different; they may want the control for themselves alone."

"If they're friendly, we needn't worry," said Kennedy. "Sooner or later, contact will be made from one side or the other and agreement reached. But in view of the facts, and of our own precarious position on Earth, we'll have to assume they're somehow hostile. Then it becomes a problem of finding them, spying them out—and destroying their power."

"I don't think they are of the race at all," said Anna suddenly.

They looked at her in some surprise. Her strange eyes went beyond them, out to the darkness beyond the window, and her few voiced words were very quiet. "I've seen some of those writings Gunnarsson talks about," she whispered. "I've heard some of the music, seen paintings

and poems and sculpture. And there's the whole way in which they've gone about all this.

"It doesn't *feel* right."

There was a longer silence now. They could sense the tension in her nerves, catch a fragment of thought more on the subconscious than the conscious level. It was weirdly convincing, the more so since all of them had bits and pieces of undeveloped abilities—and intuition or precognition or whatever it was might well be one of them.

A stocky, space-burned male spoke from a corner. "Sophoulis," he introduced himself. "I came along when Kyrenberg told me there was to be a meeting. I've got a hunch of my own about these beings."

THEY TURNED to him, and the enormous truth was in their minds even before he spoke. He nodded grimly.

Kennedy lifted his eyebrows. The gesture could have been rendered as, "What evidence have you?"

"I've been exploring on Mars lately. Geological survey. I got off by myself in the Syrtis Minor, a long ways from anyone else or any usual visitors. And I saw a spaceship.

"It came low over the sand—a huge thing, at least a thousand feet long. It was of some shining coppery metal I couldn't identify, and its design was different from anything I'd ever seen or imagined before. For one thing, it had no vision ports that I could see. For another thing, it had no jets. It just seemed to glide along with no motive power at all—and fast!

"I hunched low in the sand and tried to hide, but as soon as it was over the horizon I got out my instruments. There were some pretty sensitive detectors there. I could have spotted any ship in the Solar System by the radiations from its atomic and electronic equipment, shielded or not. But this thing didn't make the needles flicker even once. On the other hand, it was emitting quite a lot of subelectronic stuff.

"When I got back to Sandy Land-

ing, I tried to organize an expedition into the Syrtis country. I meant to find their base. I would have gone alone if I could have gotten a Mars-tractor and the rest of the things I needed. But it was the same old story you've been telling. So sorry, all the tractors are spoken for. No, I'm afraid we can't get any from Aresport or Schiaparelli either. When I tried to buy one from a private party at an outrageous price, something tied up the communications to Earth, I couldn't get funds from my bank. And so on. I had to give up finally. And that's all I know—but I think it's enough!"

They looked at each other, the supermen, and finally Kennedy laughed, a harsh bark in the explosive silence. "It's not conclusive," he said, "but it's certainly indicative. If there are beings from the stars who want to control Earth for their own purposes, it would explain a lot of things.

"And in that case, we have to find them. And overcome them. Because they surely aren't going to let us go through with our own plans."

"It might be done," said Anna softly. "I think perhaps they could be found." Decision firmed her mouth. "You'll take a vacation from the lab, Will. Then our first job will be to disappear so that they can't possibly know where we are. Then we have to start looking for them—without ever revealing ourselves. And then we have to communicate the information, preferably without their knowing it."

Her eyes swept the room. "And the rest of you will have to organize an attack. I don't know yet what kind it will be. I rather think physical force would be useless against these creatures, whatever they are—men or supermen or nonhumans from the stars. But we have to be ready for anything. We'll need all the supermen of Earth ready to strike in any fashion that may be necessary."

They nodded, bleakly.

When Kennedy and Anna emerged onto the roof, only an hour or so had passed. He was vaguely surprised to

find it still near the middle of the night.

He looked up to the grandly glittering stars and a shiver ran down his spine. The darkness seemed suddenly cold.



KENNEDY had set up a small supersonic vibrator to soundproof the room. Now they were as alone in it as they could be on Earth.

Alone, alone—it was dark outside; the early night had fallen and a heavy spring rain washed out of the lowering sky and rivered along the empty street. The dim yellow lamps gleamed on the wet pavement. A dull glow of city lights flimmered behind the looming buildings, and he could feel the rumble of traffic and sense the pulsing nervous flow of millions of lives. But in this district the ways were deserted, the hotel was quiet, they were alone.

Anna was playing her violin. The music rose and fell, wailing an eerie desolation through him, swirling in the air like dead leaves hurrying before a gale. He sat at the window, staring into the rain. It ran down the glass, a slow dark stream, he seemed to be looking out at a drowned world.

The music filled the cheap, dreary room with a song that was wild and desolate, calling to the nighted sky and mumbling over a barren ground. There was darkness in the music, night and wind and a quenchless bitter longing; it hunted up and down the scale with hunger in its heart. Anna was lost in it; her eyes were unseeing and her silvery-gold head was bent over the violin as if it whispered something to her.

Kennedy sat half listening, half thinking his own thoughts. The long months of work were done, and now the climax was on him. Unless—un-

less this, too, were a blind alley; unless he should go into the building and find only emptiness. He wondered. More and more, his opponents seemed shadows, ghostly hands moving a piece on a chessboard and then retreating into darkness. He wondered if he would ever really find them.

But the trail seemed clear. It had taken a long time of slow patient investigation, feeling their way along the tangled net of the enemy organization, and the need for secrecy had hampered them still further and tautened their nerves to the breaking point. But—it could be done.

One could find out that a certain company was controlled by unknowns in another city, who in turn were puppets of someone else—not that they knew it, but economic and social strings were pulled, they reacted accordingly, and so the will of the hidden masters was done. These threads were themselves manipulated from some other place, and of course there was a reaction such that the organizations they controlled had influence on them—the sheer immensity of the web put it beyond even Kennedy's full understanding; but it worked, it worked, and with a minimum of direct supervision.

And some or other important human, politician or scientist or writer, could be shown to be under the influence of someone else whose antecedents were vague. And the superman's telepathy, maddeningly incomplete and unreliable as it was, revealed evidence of direct mental tampering in those advisors, their encephalic currents weren't quite normal—

There were other traces: a brilliantly written political treatise, a scientific paper, a symphony or painting, which somehow didn't feel right, didn't fit in with the times. One could try to locate the author or artist—and that trail ended in a controlled human or a blank anonymity, but one could still hazard a guess—

There were gaps in the trail, dead ends where no human detective could have gone further. But always Anna's intuition suggested some other

approach, leaping beyond facts to a conclusion she could not justify rationally but which turned out to be right more often than not. "*The author of this paper is an amateur musician...classical mostly...I don't know why, it feels as if he must be...*" And there had been Kennedy's logic, piecing together seemingly unrelated data, slowly evolving a complete picture—

And ultimately one thread led to New York and the Terran Import Company. An unostentatious firm, not openly wealthy or powerful, but doing more business than it should, spreading tentacles into every corner of the Solar System. The management was all human, very respectable, entirely above suspicion. But Kennedy had seen the president and felt the curious impulses superimposed on the normal nervous rhythms which meant that some sort of compulsion had been put on him.

THE ALIENS had to have some kind of front. In the last analysis, they had to have a definite headquarters. More likely they had many, and the Terran Import Company was one.

And if this was the end of the long hunt, then he had to enter their stronghold and find out what they really were and try to get back alive.

"Tonight," he said. "Tonight I'll go in; the building is empty after midnight except for a watchman, I've made certain of that."

He felt the small subelectronic communicator in his pocket. Anna had another tuned to his, and one of their trunks held a larger unit which could reach the Council all over Earth. Given one minute to flash his information to her, he could let all the race know who the enemy was. After that—

Well, he hoped to escape with his life and sanity, but it didn't matter too much. Life under that shadow would not be worth a great deal to a being with his power compulsion.

The supermen had to control Earth, otherwise life became an empty farce and it was better to lie in the ground.

Anna put her violin aside and came

over to him. "Still not a trace," she murmured. "We've run them down, I'm sure of it, but still not a hint what they are. Who are they, to hide that well?"

Kennedy shrugged. "Who knows? They could be from any of the stars."

"Maybe. But still—it doesn't feel that way. They don't really act the way aliens should. There's something—terrestrial—about them, Will. I don't know what it is, but I know it's there."

He smiled crookedly. "But you don't like the theory that they're of our race or a similar mutation," he pointed out.

"No. That doesn't seem right either, somehow." She shuddered and laid a hand on his. The lazy mockery had worn from her in the last months, her cool self-possession had dropped away and she was frightened. "I can't imagine what they are. I just can't imagine anything that fits."

"I still favor the notion that they're from the stars," he said; "another mutation like ours just violates probability."

"We ourselves do that," she replied.

"True. It's still the most baffling scientific mystery I know of." He looked out into the rainy night and his laugh was harsh. "Why are we trying to track down these aliens? What do we care what they're like? We still don't really know what we are."

"Doesn't Lomonosov think our mutation involves some new biological principle?"

"Yes. But he's never been able to work out just what the principle is." Kennedy swung around to face her. "Look, let's go over everything we know about ourselves. Once again, for the millionth time. It may give us a clue. It may hint at what the aliens are."

HE TICKED the points off on his fingers. "Externally, we look human, except that some of us lack wisdom teeth and little toes and all males have a tendency to early baldness. Internally, we're definitely

not human; we're superior to man in many ways. We lack the vermiform appendix, of course; the arch of the foot is stronger; the vertebrae of the lumbar region have fused; the pelvis is different; the sinus drains downward; certain muscles differ, the circulatory system is more efficient; the eyes are keener and stand the strain of close work better—in general, we're mechanically superior to man. We do, though, have less sense of smell—again, about what you'd expect in the next stage of human evolution. There is also a tendency to brachycephaly and a tall, slender build, though that does have exceptions.

"Metabolism is different, more efficient as a rule. We have partial voluntary control of involuntary functions when we want it; for instance, we can set up a nerve bloc to cut off pain impulses from the brain, and a few of us seem able even to control regeneration—it's handy to be able to will the absorption of a tumor! We can handle all this because we have the intelligence and self-control to make proper use of it, which other animals, including most men, couldn't. A primitive human who could will to cease feeling pain would simply ignore those danger signals, and soon die.

"The nervous system is the vital point of difference. Our brains aren't larger than human, but they're better organized. We don't go insane, though we're not all free from neuroses, without therapy. The average I. Q., insofar as it means anything in relation to us, is well over 200, and we are capable of totally different types of thought from human logic. And then we have fragments of still other abilities, telepathy and precognition and perfect intuition and more—but all in the most rudimentary form, as if we were still evolving them.

"And, of course, we're sterile." Bitterness twisted his mouth. "We're sterile."

"And why is that?" she asked softly, though she had heard the answer often enough before.

"It's a matter of chromosome de-

fects. A union of gametes, in our case, just doesn't produce a viable cell. I don't think there's anything that can be done about it. Our best bet would be some form of synthetic reproduction, exogenetic development of artificially created cells." He made a wry face. "I don't like that much better."

The rain poured down, slow and dark and still.

"Now as to our origin," went on Kennedy after a moment, "we're all born of human parents—human mothers, at least. We appear in all races with about the same—low—frequency, and usually don't suspect our nature until one of the Council's investigators finds us, routes us through therapy, then takes us into the organization. Feeling ourselves, then—casting off the armor and fictitious loyalties of most humans, we're glad to join our own species."

"It was only about fifty years ago that a few of us reached the true conclusion as to their nature and began to look for others. Since then we've only found about three thousand, out of the Solar System's four billion. It's no high percentage, but we think the ordinary rate of birth is enough to maintain our numbers."

"A few facts have come out: A large proportion of us are illegitimate children with mysterious fathers who have since disappeared; and there's excellent reason to suspect that even the married women who bore the rest did not have those children by their husbands. Illegitimacy is getting so common these days that we've never been able to track down any of these unknown men. Naturally, it would be wonderful to find a few fertile supermen, but I doubt that there are any. Our fathers, I think, carry some mutation which combined with the normal human inheritance produces one of us, but their phenotype is probably quite human. It's well known that such crosses differ more radically from the norm than either parent; in fact, I think a good many defective births have the same fathers—unsuccessful crosses. At any rate, the hybrid human-semihuman is sterile like many

other hybrids in the biological world.

"Sterile!" The bitterness was suddenly raw in his voice. "By all chaos, sterile! Our kind can reach the stars, but it can't do what the humblest plant can do; it can't maintain itself."

"Why?" she asked.

"**W**HY? WHO knows? Apart from the simple biology of it, I don't know of any deeper reason. Unless—well, other species have reached a peak and then suddenly declined and become extinct. It may be the same with man. There may be some basic reason why the ultimate development of a race must be sterile—an Indian summer before the long winter comes." He nodded. "Yes, I rather think it's something like that."

"But we aren't the end of evolution, Will. We know we could go higher. All those half-abilities we have—they must mean something."

"Uh-huh. But what? Humankind doesn't seem to have changed appreciably for the last half-million years—maybe million. Why is that? Why should it be static so long, when it had been one of Earth's most rapidly evolving lines before? And then why should we suddenly appear, all in one jump which violates every law of biological probability? I don't know, Anna."

"I don't think we are the first," she said. "I think members of the race have been born for a long time, but they never knew who they were. There have been sterile geniuses in the past—at least, they never had children. Da Vinci, Roger Bacon—I wonder. I wonder how lonely they must have been."

"That sounds more reasonable," he admitted. "But even so, the birth of something so radically different from normal human stock—but no matter. We may find out someday. There's this problem here to solve first."

He got up and paced restlessly. "I thought maybe reviewing the facts would help me somehow with this," he said. "If there were a chance of a similar mutation, a third species of genus homo—but I can't see that. As

you said, the thought just doesn't feel right."

His face was haggard as he looked out at the rain. "We've got to overcome them," he said between his teeth. "We have no choice, Anna. The need to control is in us. We can't fit into human society, it doesn't have goals or a structure suitable for us, so we have to dominate it. Not tyrannically, even though we can rule man better than he can rule himself. But the road humans take must be one which does not block ours. And if these aliens dispute our road—they have to go. For the sake of our sanity, they have to go."

The night brooded enormously over him, the dark was filled with the slow senseless power of rain spilling from the sky, mindless inorganic night of loneliness and despair. He stood waiting for the hours to end, sunk into the pit of the night.

Anna took up her violin and began to play again.



AFTER THE rain, there was fog swirling through the hollow canyons of streets, blurring the lamps and the few shadowy vehicles which slipped by. Kennedy felt glad of the mist, though he knew it wouldn't hide him from the watchers of the enemy.

He stood in an alley across the street from the Terran Import Building, straining his perceptions into the wet gray dark. The building wasn't large as such structures went, but it loomed black and monstrous in the fog; it seemed a crouching beast waiting for him. He fought back the tension that thrummed along every nerve and groped for signs of life.

He had watched the place for several nights running. It seemed to be deserted after twelve or one, and it would be no trick to get inside. Only—was it really empty?

His sense of nervous energy reached out through the fog. He

could feel the vibrations of the watchman, an ordinary untampered human making a sleepy round—no danger there. But what else was it that thrummed and pulsed in the building, just on the limits of his perception?

He strove to identify that deep steady wave, but it eluded him, maddeningly. It wasn't an electric or atomic machine of any sort, it wasn't anything. He couldn't even be sure whether it really existed outside his own strained imagination.

But of course they would have unknown mechanisms operating, something subelectronic perhaps. It might be some sort of barrier, a death trap for the curious—worse yet, something that would seize control of a mind—but that was a chance he had to take.

If he could get in, if he could find their central offices and go through whatever files and apparatus there might be—even if no direct evidence of their origin and nature were present, he and Anna should easily be able to deduce enough from whatever they found to serve as a basis of action for the race.

The race, the race—the Councillors crouched over their receivers; the supermen waiting around the planet with their tremendous hidden weapons—the night was full of their tension. Strange struggle, beneath the surface of man's peaceful world! Briefly, Kennedy wondered what powers and intrigues might not make up the whole of reality, what hidden wars might be going on between beings whose existence even the supermen and their opponents did not suspect.

But no time for that, no time. He was going in.

He whispered into the communicator: "All clear, I think."

"Will—" Anna's anxious breath trembled in his ear. "Will—don't go in there."

"I have to, Anna."

"I—it isn't you alone, Will. It's all of us. I have a feeling that we—we won't like what we find out tonight—"

He smiled wistfully in the dark and the drifting fog. "I don't like it now," he said. "But this is enough

now. The next time I call, it will be with information of—some kind!" With a sudden tenderness he had never really felt before: "Goodbye, Anna."

Then quickly he walked across the street to the entrance of the building.

THE DOOR was locked, of course. That meant nothing, the tumblers clicked back from his magnetic controller and he stepped through into the lobby. It lay in shadow, only a dim night light burning—empty, empty.

He slipped over to the stairs and went up them at a rapid cat-footed pace. One hand lay in his pocket, the fingers wrapped about one of the supermen's small deadly energy guns. He knew how futile it was likely to be, but the cold metal gave him animal comfort.

The vibrations of the machine were stronger now. It must lie somewhere near the top of the building, which was also the most logical place for the offices of the enemy. Probably no human was allowed up there.

Human! He felt the life-energy of the watchman, coming down the stairs, and flattened himself against the wall. It was best not to be too obtrusive physically, though—

It was easy. His mind seemed abnormally strong; it surged forth and gripped the old man's brain with palpable fingers. It was just a matter of cutting off optical perception of that area where he stood. The watchman never saw him; he went on downstairs in his slow fashion, unknowing.

Kennedy stood looking after the retreating back. It wasn't often that he could control any portion of a human's brain that directly, but the tension that keyed him now had sharpened and strengthened all his faculties to a terrific pitch. If only he could rely on that ability, could have it all the time—

But he didn't. It was partial, sporadic, not really controllable. The physiologists said it was a new brain center, a mutation of the parapsychological powers possessed in very

slight degree by humans; but superman didn't really have much more than *homo sapiens*.

Why not? Why are we incomplete? Why are we sterile, why has evolution come to a halt in us when there is so much left to do? How is it that we are born at all, who are our fathers, why should they have been mutated either? So many new abilities in one mutation just doesn't make biological sense.

But no time for that now, there's more urgent work at hand.

He went on up the stairs, flight after flight winding up into darkness. The building was silent, empty, but the monstrous nonauditory thrum of the machine filled his being now, shouted within him, raised shuddering echoes in the atoms of the walls.

Upward, upward. Now the top floor lay ahead, and it was closed off by a locked door. Kennedy opened it and stepped through into a corridor.

It lay blank and bare before him, lit by a couple of dull night lights, full of shadows and silence. And the machine.

And the machine! The terrific pulsations shook his being now, quivered in every cell of him. Incredible that humans went blindly on their way, in and out of the building, and never sensed it, never dreamed of its existence or of the monstrous powers that laired in this hall. Fantastic, that the rulers of the world should be here.

No—not here. The floor was empty, there was no life anywhere in its stillness, only he had movement through the twilight. He breathed a shuddering sigh of relief. The enemy was gone. He was safe.

HE WENT down the corridor toward the ordinary glass-fronted door from behind which came the subliminal drone of the machine. His footsteps echoed hollowly between the walls; his shadow followed him, rippling over the bare polished stone. He could not shake off the irrational feeling that it was a fetch, a watchful ghost dogging him down a

road along which there would be no return.

The vibrations of the machine must have affected his nerves. Grasping for sanity, he paused at a window to look over the city. Beyond the darkness of this area, it glowed and flamed with light; it was filled with the life of wakeful millions, the muted hum of traffic came faintly to his preternaturally sharpened hearing.

Mankind, unsuspecting mankind going about its ways while he stood in a tower of darkness, while the night was filled with a hidden struggle for the rule of those witless herds, Man, father to the superman, not knowing his sons for what they were.

But are we his sons? Is such a mutation even possible?

What, after all, was the most logical way for superman to evolve? Not in one fantastic mutation of unknown thousands of genes all working to produce the same result; the very formulation was an insult to the laws of probability. No, *homo superior* should have evolved from *homo sapiens* in the same way that other species had evolved from a parent stock—by isolation of a few not very different mutants, selection and intensification of the new traits, new mutations gradually appearing and being lost if they were unfavorable, being incorporated if they gave some advantage.

Like always tended to mate with like. Even in the earliest times, there must have been a strong tendency for the most intelligent people, or those differing from the norm in any fashion, to get mates similar to themselves. If at an early stage such a kith had withdrawn from the mainstream of humanity—

And then as time went on and the differences became greater; the new stock would perhaps deliberately seek to incorporate such humans as showed similar traits into itself. Particularly if its high intelligence led it to early knowledge of the principles of inheritance. Thus, for a long time, the developing superman stock would be mingling unsuspected with

homo sapiens, seeking out desirable humans for inclusion into the group—until finally the differences became so great that mating was no longer possible. Even then, *homo superior* could control *homo sapiens* whenever necessary, though probably the new species would hold itself aloof most of the time. It would have so little in common with the ancestral stock.

And that would also explain why the human genus, which had hitherto been evolving at one of the highest speeds known to paleontology, should suddenly have become nearly static. There had been no appreciable change in man for the past half-million or even million years. Of course not—*homo superior* had been skimming off the cream of the crop!

It explained a great deal. But it did not explain the fact that *homo superior* had *not* appeared in that fashion, that he was, instead, born to normal humans with all his alienage given him at one incredible step.

Nor did it say anything about the unknowns, except to suggest that perhaps they were another type of mutation. How unhuman could they be? *We're bad enough!*

But I'm wasting time.

The flashing thought, which had taken perhaps half a second, died within Kennedy. He threw back his shoulders, turned from the window, and walked up to the door.

It was locked with—something new. Something that held it shut but was not material, a binding force. Kennedy would have sworn if he had been human. As it was, he took out his energy gun and cut the door open. Let them realize that he had been here; it would be too late then.

THE ROOM beyond seemed strangely unreal. There was a cold white light streaming from walls and ceiling and floor, filling the very air. He had no way of gauging distances, the room might have been small or it might have reached out beyond the edge of the sky.

His eyes swung to the machine. It crouched low on the floor, a massive thing with angles and curves in its dark metal that did not seem to obey

any sane geometrical laws. Multidimensional—what were the builders?

No time, no time. He looked about for other evidence, a filing cabinet, a desk drawer, anything. Yes, there was a strangely shimmering globe seeming to hang in midair. As he looked, the vague swirl of formlessness within it coalesced into symbols.

No language of Earth, that. He decided that it was somehow responsive to telepathic impulses, throwing the desired information onto a screen at the owner's mental command. He thought at it, *What is the origin and nature of your builders?* and his mind trembled as he did.

The symbols were meaningless, but he photographed them with a tiny microcamera. The superman philologists could, with the help of their electronic semantic analyzers, break down any rational language in short order. He flashed other questions: *What are their powers? What do they want on Earth? What do they know about us?*, and watched the symbols change.

His glee was boundless. Here was all the information that they needed. The supermen would know—and knowing, they could act, and—

And—

He turned at the sudden blaze within his nerves. His gun leaped into his hand. And then his fingers went limp, the weapon clattered to the floor, and he was locked into physical paralysis.

The being that stepped from the machine looked manlike, but his magnificently domed head was bald and the great golden eyes held such a frightful intensity of power that Kennedy could not meet them, he cried out in terror.

The thoughts roared in his skull: *—It was about time you knew. Now*

that you have come this far, you may as well go back to your friends and warn them. They have their place in the—?—plan, but it will be useless for them to oppose us. We can stop all their energies, freeze their minds, and cast them down to ruin. Accept the fact. Accept us as the rulers of Earth.

Grim amusement tinged the thought:—*The servant warned me and I came. But it was hardly necessary. The records would have told you the truth.*

—*Incredible that you did not suspect before. But you dared not realize the truth. It was staring you in the eyes, but your subconscious minds would not accept the conclusion.*

—*You are essentially right about the origin of homo superior... Man and your breed have a place in our scheme, but you will never be able to understand its entirety.*

—*There are not many of us on Earth, and most of those are males. Others are on the great worlds of the Galaxy where proper—?—development is possible. Since we can easily disguise ourselves, and we are so made that human women are not repulsively alien, there are occasional hybrids.*

Hybrids, with only part of the powers of their fathers. Like most interspecies hybrids, sterile.

—*I pity you, half-breed. Go back to your kind now. Live your lives. As long as you do not trespass on forbidden ground, we will leave you alone. Goodbye.*

The steel grip on his mind was lifted. Kennedy stumbled, fell to the floor, looked numbly up at the figure that loomed over him against the blaze of energy from the machine.

"Father," he whispered. "Father."



Age of Prophecy

★ FEATURE NOVEL ★

by Margaret St. Clair

(illustration by Lawrence)

Benjamin had powers—real powers—and that meant he was a true prophet, one who could seek out the false prophets and protect the people from the Scientists. For hadn't the Scientists nearly destroyed humanity with their evil?

"**L**OOK HARDER," the old man said sternly. "You're not trying. Over on the road to Whittier. Now then. What do you see?"

The boy squirmed. "I get so tired, grand-daddy," he complained. "When I look the way you tell me to, it makes my eyes hurt and gives me a pain in my head. Can't I go play?"

"No," the old man answered unsympathetically. "Close your eyes, then, if looking makes them hurt. You always see more with your eyes closed anyway. Look out through the top of your head. Is there anybody on the road?"

There was a pause. The boy's face grew tense and a little pale. His hands had clenched. "I see five people walking along together," he said at last.

"Good!—Are they human beings, or mutants?"

"Human beings."

"Is there anyone with them—a prophet, or a lord—or are they by themselves?"

"They're by themselves. Two of them are women, and one of them is wearing shoes. I—I think they must be going to Whittier to trade, because the woman with shoes is carrying a couple of chickens, and the others have vegetables and stuff. The big man has money in his pocket."

"That's fine. That's more than you usually see. You're getting better all the time, Benjamin. Can you see what's in the people's minds?"

"Minds?" The boy opened his eyes and gave Tobit a puzzled

glance. "I don't know what you mean, grand-daddy."

The old man sighed. "You never can do that," he said softly, as if to himself. "It's too bad. There's no ability it's more useful for a prophet to have. Still—" his face brightened—"there's no doubt that you have powers, real powers. More than I'd hoped. You're going to be a famous prophet some day, Benjamin."

"Can I go play now?" the boy asked, unimpressed.

"A famous prophet," Tobit repeated, ignoring him. "People will crowd forward to honor you and bring good things to you. They'll do whatever you tell them. You can have whatever you want without asking for it." He seemed to hug himself with delight at the prospect. "When that happens you won't forget your old grand-daddy, will you, Benjamin? Your old grand-daddy who's always been so good to you?"

"You gave me an awful whipping last week for letting the birds go," the boy said. He did not seem so much resentful as confused.

Tobit's hand went up quickly as if to strike. Then he lowered it and smiled. "Poor boy, you're not old enough to know that it was for your own good. I've always done the best I could for you, Benjamin, the very best I could. When your poor mother died I took care of you and fed you and brought you up. It was a hard job for a sickly old man. You won't forget it when you're rich and famous, Benjamin? You'll remember all I've done for you?"

"Oh, yes," the boy said, wriggling.



Grandfather . . he's a false prophet. I can see—he has a machine hidden beneath his robes!"

He seemed embarrassed. "Oh, yes, grand-daddy, yes."

WHEN BENJAMIN was ten, he located a well of abundant water for Garretson, Tobit's nearest neighbor, after three dowers had ingloriously failed. When he was thirteen, he told Mrs. Mathias who had stolen her grandmother's aluminum cooking pan, and where the thief had hidden it. By his fifteenth birthday, his clairvoyance was as well-established as his open-eye vision, and he was on the way to adding clairaudence to it. A little before he was eighteen, Tobit decided that Benjamin was ready for the miracle trials.

The city had been the most diffuse of any on the American continent. Those who loved it had praised it as vital and full of paradox; those who hated it had spoken of its sprawling, strident vulgarity. The falling bombs had blasted its center into nothingness; but, as with some huge animal which, though mortally wounded, takes long to die, life persisted through its complex periphery. All over the continent—more, all over the world—cults had risen, prophets had spung up, in the room left by the failure of established religion and civil authority. But in the ruins of the city, with the Pacific on one hand and the vast rampart of the Rockies on the other, the new religions thrived furiously. Prophets, lamas, adepts, visionaries, seers jostled one another in the streets, and each had his little knot of almost fanatic followers.

Tobit had outfitted himself and Benjamin for the journey with sandals of hand-plaited grass. He did not consider bare feet dignified; besides there was enough asphalt left on the road for it to be a trying footing when the weather was hot. Tobit wore his usual, much-patched denim coveralls; but for Benjamin he had contrived to get, by dint of unheard-of scrimping and contrivance, a long robe of coarse brown cloth. It was the one indispensable necessity for a man who aspired to prophethood.

"What's it like, grandfather?"

Benjamin asked as they walked along. He had grown into a tall, broad-shouldered blond young man. His forehead was high, his blue eyes intelligent; but his face had an odd, indrawn look and his lips were oversensitive.

"Stupid question!" old Tobit snapped. "You saw it all last year yourself with your eyes shut!" He was tired already, and fatigue always made him irritable. And then, relenting, "Why, I told you. About this time of year all the prophets meet in General Square and show what they can do. It's a sort of a contest. Some of them just preach, but most of them do things, too—heal the sick, answer questions, work miracles."

Benjamin sighed. His fingers twisted together. "I—I don't know..." he said.

"Nonsense! I tell you, Benjamin, you're a better prophet than any of them. I've heard that some of them are nothing but fakes. You've really got powers, Benjamin. You've got powers."

The doubtful expression faded from the young man's face. "Yes, I know," he said, nodding. "I've got powers."

AS THE DAY wore on and the wayfaring continued, Tobit leaned more heavily on the young man's arm. They stopped at sundown for their second meal—goat's milk cheese and thin, sour home-made wine—and slept in the open air in a field beside the road. It was no hardship for Benjamin, but Tobit made much wistful mention of the aching of his old bones. The two rose early, well before dawn, and by the time the sun was well up in the heavens were walking through the rubbly outskirts of the city. Between ten and eleven they got to General Square.

Nothing in Benjamin's closed-eye vision had prepared him for the sight. It was not so much that his clairvoyance confounded perspective and omitted color entirely, as it was that the crowd in the square was altogether outside his experience. He had never imagined that there could

be so many people gathered in one place; later, thinking over the day, he decided that there must have been over a thousand of them. And, since the material side of civilization dies slowly, many of the women were clothed in dresses of bright cloth, wore heeled shoes, had unnaturally colored lips. There was not a mutant to be seen.

Around the sides of the square the long-robed prophets stood. Some had erected crude tents amid the rubble or stood beside creaking booths decorated with pennants and small flags. The crowd had clotted around the prophets in little knots, and people drifted slowly from one group to the next.

Benjamin tugged at the old man's arm. "Grandfather..." he said. He licked his lips. "Can't we walk about and listen to them? Before I show what I can do?"

Tobit stole a shrewd glance at the young man's face. "Oh, all right," he said ungraciously. "If you want to. But you mustn't be afraid, Benjamin; let me do the talking when the time comes."

They moved into the dusty square. One of the prophets was preaching in a loud, angry voice, and Benjamin halted in front of him.

"Sin! Sin!" the man bellowed furiously. He tossed his long hair back and clenched his fists. "Fine clothes, powder and paint! Sin! It's sin! That's what brought the bombs down on us. We must get rid of sin!" It was curious, Benjamin thought, that the prophet's audience was composed almost exclusively of women with gay frocks and painted lips. They nodded agreement from time to time as they listened to the prophet with obvious enjoyment.

The next prophet was a healer. The crowd had formed a respectful ring about him and a little girl with a twisted leg who stood balancing on home-made crutches in front of him. A middle-aged woman who must have been the girl's mother waited tensely at the side.

The healer bent and tilted the child's chin toward him with his smooth white hand. He was looking directly into her eyes. "You can

walk... You can walk..." he intoned. "You must have faith. My child, all things are possible to me. You can walk."

The child nodded trancedly. Her eyes were almost closed. Suddenly the healer pulled the crutches away from her. "Walk!" he commanded. "You can walk!" He backed away from her and held out his hand.

THE CROWD held its breath. Slowly the child moved toward him, a step, a step, and then another wobbling step. The healer snatched her up on his shoulder, turned to the audience. "She can walk!" he announced triumphantly. There was a roar of confirmation and applause.

"That was pretty good," Tobit said, nodding. "That fellow's pretty slick. You can see he's got some real powers."

Benjamin made no answer. He was looking confused. It seemed to him that just as the healer had picked up the little girl her eyes had come open and she had moaned, "My leg! Oooh, how it hurts in my leg!"

"I've heard of this fellow," Tobit said as they moved on to the next of the seers. He seemed to have forgotten his irritation at Benjamin's recreancy and to be enjoying himself. "His name's Ramakrisna, and he's one of the smartest prophets there is. He can do all sorts of things."

Ramakrisna was a stout man, wearing a very long, very heavy robe. It was made of dull yellow cloth. He was standing with closed eyes. As Tobit and Benjamin pushed through the crowd around him he slowly opened his lids. His eyes were strange, large-pupilled ones, with a glassy, compelling luster. "Your people sowed the wind," he said out of a silence to his listeners. "It was the whirlwind they reaped."

The woman standing beside Benjamin nodded. "It was the scientists," she breathed, "the wicked scientists."

"You reaped the whirlwind," Ramakrisna went on impressively. "Your erring world lies in ruins about you. Where are you to go, to what are

you to turn? But there is wisdom in the East."

There was a sort of moan from his audience. The woman beside Benjamin was leaning forward eagerly, "Show us, lord," she whispered, as if to herself.

"You are like lost and frightened children," Ramakrisna said. Each syllable came out weighted and slow. "You are lost in darkness. But for the sincere seeker there is always light. The light of Asia. Do you seek that light?"

There was a sibilance of assent from the crowd. Several of the women were swaying back and forth with their eyes shut. "It is written, the spirit has eternal dominion over the flesh," Ramakrisna chanted. "The spirit has power over matter such as your material western science never knew." He halted and seemed to be gathering himself for an effort. "If there are unbelievers among you, behold! Behold, I bring you a sign!"

He seemed to stop breathing. Then, very slowly, he rose into the air. While Benjamin watched incredulously he moved upward until he was some four or five feet off the ground.

Benjamin tugged at Tobit's sleeve. "Grandfather, he—"

"Be quiet!" Tobit said in an acid whisper without turning to look at him. "Don't bother me. I want to watch this fellow; he's wonderful."

"Grandfather, grandfather, listen. He hasn't got any powers. I can see he hasn't. He's got something under his clothes that's doing it."

Tobit tried to pull away from his protege, but Benjamin hung on. "I can see the thing when I close my eyes," he said in a rapid whisper. "It's a kind of harness around his shoulders, and some kind of force comes out of it and pushes him off the ground. I think he's one of those false prophets you told me about."

TOBIT'S attention was won. He gave Benjamin a keen glance. "You mean he's wearing something, some sort of machine?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"You're sure of it?"

"Oh, yes. I can see it perfectly plainly when I close my eyes."

Tobit bit his lips. He seemed to be considering. He looked at Benjamin again. Then he made up his mind. "Pick me up and set me on your shoulder," he commanded. "I don't weigh much, and you're young. Don't ask questions, Benjamin; do as I say."

From his new seat Tobit surveyed the crowd around Ramakrisna for an instant. He clutched the shoulder of Benjamin's robe with one hand for support. "Ramakrisna lies!" he yelled at the top of his thin voice.

Slowly faces turned toward them. There was a resentful murmur from the crowd. "Blasphemer!" a woman screamed. Other voices took the word up. The murmur grew angrier.

"Ramakrisna lies!" Tobit yelled again. "He is a secret scientist. Under his robe he wears one of the wickedest of the old science machines. He is wearing an anti-grav. He lies to you. He is a secret scientist." He waved his arms. "A secret scientist!"

The crowd's voice was changing its note. It was angry still, but growing questioning. Its anger could change direction easily.

Ramakrisna had descended to the ground. His oily face was a little pale. His hands were fumbling hastily inside his robe.

"Stop him!" Tobit screamed. "He's getting rid of it. Don't let him fool you any more! Tear off his robe!"

The crowd moved uneasily. "Hurry! Hurry!" Tobit yelled. "He's a false prophet! Tear off his robe!"

The crowd surged forward. A dozen hands stripped Ramakrisna bare. His yellow robe fluttered to the rubbly ground in long strips. He clasped his hands over his plump chest and tried to hide the betraying straps of the harness, but everyone saw. A long, wrathful note like a growl left the crowd's throat.

"Benjamin knew!" Tobit shrieked. "Benjamin saw!" His thin voice had great carrying power. "Ramakrisna's a false prophet; Benjamin saw straight through his robes to his lying heart!"

"He lied to us," a woman shouted. Her face was distorted with hysteria. Benjamin thought she was the same woman who had called Tobit a blasphemer at first. "A false prophet deserves to die!"

She picked up a rock. In a moment the air was full of flying stones. Ramakrisna cowered back and tried to shield his face from them with his arms. Bloody blotches leaped into being on his flanks and sides.

He cried out and turned to run. The hail of stones pursued him. Before he had gone three paces he stumbled and fell to his knees. His forehead was streaming blood.

Tobit hopped nimbly down from his perch on Benjamin's shoulder. "Kill him!" he urged shrilly. "More rocks!" He set the example by hurling stone after stone.

The crowd had gone mad. People were running up from all over the square with stones in their hands. The thud of rocks against Ramakrisna's unprotected body was like the sound of monstrous hail. While Benjamin watched with horrified eyes the prophet tried weakly to rise to his feet again. Both his arms were plainly broken. He fell back, rolled over on his side.

The rocks covered him. They fell on the mound of Ramakrisna's body with a ceaseless spiteful spat, spat, spat. For a time the mound heaved feebly. Then it grew quiet. Only when it had long ceased to move did the crowd stop throwing stones.

Benjamin covered his face with his hands. He was feeling sick.

"Got what was coming to him, didn't he?" Tobit said cheerfully. "That's the kind of robe all false prophets ought to wear, a robe of stone. They fixed him up right."

"I didn't mean this to happen," Benjamin said.

"Oh, don't be silly," Tobit snapped. "He was a scientist; he deserved to die. Take your hands down from your face, boy, and stand up straight. You'll never have a better chance than this to get followers. But you'll have to get a grip on yourself."

BENJAMIN attempted to obey. "That's better," Tobit said, looking at him critically. "We'll have to hurry. People are beginning to go home."

He walked in front of Benjamin. "Ramakrisna is dead," he announced solemnly. "But the true prophet lives—Benjamin, who saved you from following after a hidden scientist. Benjamin has far-seeing and through-seeing and far-hearing. Benjamin is a true prophet who follows truth. Benjamin will tell you what to do to be saved."

The crowd, which had begun to move away, hesitated. In twos and threes people began to straggle back. Tobit stood on tiptoe to reach Benjamin's ear. "Look into them, boy," he said anxiously. "I know you can't reach into minds, but you can see what their bodies are feeling, and that's almost as good."

Benjamin obeyed. "Most of them are feeling sick," he said after a moment. "I think they wish they hadn't killed him, grandfather. That woman with the yellow hair has a terrible headache, so bad she can hardly see, and the rest are just about ready to cry. The insides of their heads look different around the eyes when they're making tears."

Tobit nodded. "You are sick at heart," he said impressively to the people standing near him. "Sick at heart. You fear you have done wrong to kill the prophet who lied to you. But Benjamin approves the act. He says that for every stone you cast at a deceiver, a hundred blessings will come to you. A hundred? No, a thousand. The world is full of blessings for the followers of Benjamin."

It was as if the crowd exhaled a corporate sigh. People who had been standing with bowed heads and drooping bodies straightened up again. Here and there appeared a vague, fugitive smile.

"Already Benjamin has saved you from following the false prophet whose lies would have cost you your salvation," Tobit said. "And that is only the beginning. Whatever you desire can be yours. Blessings such as you never dreamed of will fill

your hands. Benjamin knows. Benjamin will show you the way."

The sun was westering. From its low rays light flooded across Benjamin's head and made of his blond hair an aureole. One of the women had been staring up eagerly into his face. Now slowly she sank down on her knees and looked up at him.

"I believe, lord," she said. "Lord, I believe. Give me your blessing, lord."

Benjamin hesitated. Tobit prodded him sharply in the side. "Put your hand out over her head," he whispered, "and say, 'Bless you, my child.'"

Benjamin extended his hand palm down over the kneeling woman's bowed head. "Bless you. Bless you, my child."

2

"**Y**OU'RE DOING fine, Benjamin," Tobit said two months later. His tone was cheery, his expression self-satisfied. "Just fine, better almost than I had hoped you would. We have a fine place to sleep, the best of everything to eat, and you're getting more followers every day. You seem to have a real talent for that sort of thing. I'm proud of you."

Benjamin raised his eyebrows very slightly and looked at him. In the short time that had passed his face had taken on a surprising maturity. His gaze was level and self-confident. Only at the edges of his lips there still lurked a hint of nervousness.

"My powers are greater than I had realized," he answered simply. "It's a great thing to have powers like mine. Yes, and a great responsibility."

Tobit shot a keen glance at him from under his eyelids but said nothing. There was a knock at the door. After a moment a girl entered the room. She held a steaming dish in either hand. "Your supper, lord," she said in a low voice. She put the dishes on the table, bowed humbly

to Benjamin and Tobit, and withdrew. Benjamin's eyes followed her.

"A pretty girl, isn't she?" Tobit said, smiling. "So plump, like a little bird, and soft and brown. It's a pity that a prophet can't have anything to do with women without losing his powers."

Benjamin bit his lower lip. After a moment he nodded. "Yes, one has to pay for powers like mine; it is one of the sacrifices one must make."

They drew chairs up to the table and seated themselves. Tobit ate with good appetite. Benjamin seemed abstracted. "I'm meeting Pandiji and Ardadine outside of Alhambra tonight," he said, pushing the still half-full plate from him. "It's rather a lengthy walk, but you're welcome, if you'd like to come."

Tobit inhaled as if he were about to speak, but said nothing. Perhaps he was remembering that he had been working for the last three weeks to bring this meeting about. "Thank you, Benjamin," he said politely. "I'd be glad to come."

"Good. Ardadine tells me that woman, Gloroire Mundi, may be there too. I'm not so sure about making an agreement with her. She has a great many followers, of course, but they say she admits mutants to her congregation as well as humans."

THE MOON was only half-full; the meeting took place under the smoky light of tar-dipped torches. They sat on the pallid grass in a stubby field on the outskirts of Alhambra, three men and the woman who called herself Gloroire Mundi, each with a trusted few of his most faithful followers. And though none of them realized it, a government was being born.

"So far, so good," the woman said briskly. "We've agreed to mutual action on matters that concern us mutually, and we've arrived at a minimum code for our followers." She pushed back the mass of dark crisp auburn hair from her forehead. The white fabric of her robe leaped into prominence as the torch flared up

and then sank back into obscurity again. "Now let's come to an agreement about raiding each other's followers."

"I don't know what you mean," Benjamin said.

"Oh, don't you?" Pandiji breathed softly. He was a little man who had a habit of cracking the knuckles of his left hand while he talked. "I've heard, Benjamin, that you told your followers not less than a week ago that they would endanger their salvation if they dabbled in mysteries from the east."

"Who told you that?" Benjamin asked, stiffening.

"I know everything you know," Pandiji said.

Benjamin closed his eyes. Pandiji, he saw after a moment, was not telling the truth. A little area of his brain had lighted up in a way the young man had learned meant lies. No doubt he had a spy among Benjamin's people; it would be necessary to be more careful about them than Benjamin had been.

"Let's not quarrel," Ardadine said hastily. "Gloroire is right in principle. We've got to make some sort of truce about raiding. What about making it geographical?"

The discussion went on. Gloroire Mundi presented a number of other ideas. Some of them were discarded; more were approved.

"That's about everything, isn't it?" she said at last. "It's a long walk back for me, and it's getting late. The moon has almost set."

"What about mutants?" Pandiji asked innocently.

"Well, what about them?" Gloroire's answer was quick.

"The others of us won't admit them among our followers."

"That's silly of you. Mutants can be very helpful sometimes. Besides, if we reject them, where are they to go? It's not their fault they've mutated. I approve of mutants, if they're not too changed."

"What do you think, Benjamin?" Pandiji asked, turning to the young man.

"I hate them; they make my flesh creep."

"There's your answer," Ardadine said.

"I'm sorry, I can't see any use in discussing it further," Gloroire replied. "Perhaps some other time. But I can't stay here all night. Good night."

"Good night." The others watched her as she got up from the grass.

"It's time we started back ourselves," Benjamin said after a moment. He turned and walked toward the road.

Tobit lingered behind. "A remarkable woman," he said, gesturing in the direction Gloroire Mundi had gone. "Remarkable, though her views on mutants are a little strange. She lives near your territory, doesn't she, Pandiji? Out by Brea? That's a dangerous place to live, they say. So many gangs of thugs thereabouts. I hope she'll take care of herself. It would be highly unfortunate if anything should happen to her."

A glance of understanding passed between the two men's eyes. Pandiji nodded. "Yes, indeed," he replied smoothly, "we must trust that nothing happens to Gloroire. We should miss her advice very much."

IT WAS SOME eight days later that the news came that Gloroire Mundi had been set upon by thugs and killed. "Robbed and her throat cut," Tobit said lingeringly. He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "What a terrible thing. Dreadful, dreadful. You'll miss her at your meetings. I suppose you and the others will divide up her followers?"

"I imagine so," Benjamin said without much interest. He poured himself another cup of hot water—he and Tobit were at breakfast—before he went on. "Yes, it's a dreadful thing. It's hard for me to grasp. I suppose the best way of looking at it is to think her death is a punishment for her tolerating mutants. Our sins are noticed. Things like that don't happen by accident." He was a little pale.

"You liked her, didn't you?" Tobit said shrewdly.

A faint flush rose in Benjamin's cheeks, but he made no direct reply. Maida, the little brown girl who was in charge of Benjamin's housekeeping, came in to remove the dishes.

"There's something I want to talk to you about, Tobit," the young man said when she had gone.

"Well?"

"Maida tells me she found a self-powered hot in your room yesterday."

Tobit's eyes flickered. "It's a lie!" he said violently; "the girl's only trying to make trouble."

"No, she isn't. I saw the hot myself."

The old man changed his tactics. "It does my rheumatism so much good," he said piteously. "When my bones ache and ache at night I turn the hot on them and the pains go away. You wouldn't grudge your grandfather his little comforts, would you, boy?"

"It's not a question of grudging you anything, grandfather. But the self-powered hot is one of the things of the old science, and we all know science is dangerous and bad. We mustn't have anything to do with it."

"I've heard rumors lately that there's a nest of secret scientists still active in Pasadena, the PAS, near where the college used to be. I'm going to bring the matter up at the group meeting next week and demand that we get rid of them. But how can I have the face to refer to secret science if some one in my own household is using science secretly? My hands wouldn't be clean. You must get rid of the thing today, no matter how much it helps your rheumatism."

Tobit gave him a burning glance but made no answer.

"We'd better take no chances," Benjamin said, getting up from the table. "I'll go smash the motor on the hot myself."

I'VE LISTENED to all your arguments," Benjamin said wearily. The other prophets had been discussing his proposal for hours, and he was tired. "I've heard

Pandiji say that the scientists are dying out anyhow, since they're getting no new recruits. I've heard Ardadine say that we can't attack them since they still have science weapons, stun guns, gas and grenades, and all we have is knives, spears and clubs. Pandiji argues that the number of sick people they 'heal' is so small as to be insignificant—though I should think he would realize that for every person they help, one soul is lost to the light of prophecy. I've listened to all sorts of things this evening. I have one answer to make to them all.

"Science is wrong."

"If we know anything in the world today, we know that. Who knows what those scientists in Pasadena are doing, shut up in their laboratories?" Benjamin lingered with fascinated horror over the last word. "They may be breeding new strains of disease germs to kill the rest of us. I've heard that they have the most horrible mutants in their laboratories helping them. We must not let people like that live."

"Um." Ardadine pressed together the tips of his long slender hands.

"Even assuming they're not plotting against us—and being scientists, they're capable of anything—don't you realize how dangerous they are? Their poison will spread. Take my grandfather, for example. Nobody is more opposed to the old science than he is. But I left him at home to-night because in this matter I don't consider him reliable. He's perfectly capable of sneaking off to the scientists' clinic, or whatever they call it, if he thought they had something that would help his rheumatism. Our followers are simple people. Their minds work like that."

"I shouldn't call Benjamin's grandfather exactly simple," Pandiji said. "But there's some truth in what Benjamin argues. The scientists are, I admit, a certain danger to us." He cracked his knuckles thoughtfully. "The difficulty is in finding a practical way of getting rid of them."

"I've thought about that a lot," Benjamin replied. Despite his fa-

tigue, he leaned forward eagerly. "Since they have better weapons than we, we'd have to attack them by surprise to have any chance of success. And by the time we got our followers aroused to the point of attacking them, the attack would no longer be a surprise. You can't urge hundreds of people to do something, day after day, without the news getting out.

"But there's another way of handling it. Each of us has a few followers, say ten or fifteen, who don't need to be urged to be ready to attack the scientists. You know the people I mean—young, full of the spirit of prophecy, ready to fight. Very well, suppose we pool them. It would make a very respectable little force."



There was a wary silence. "And who would be at the head of this force?" Ardadine asked at last.

"All three of us, I suppose," Benjamin replied. "Or we might delegate leadership to one of us. I'd suggest you, Ardadine, since you seem to have a good grasp of military things."

There was an even longer silence. It lasted so long that Benjamin, growing restless, turned to his closed-eye vision for distraction. Thoughtfully he examined Pandiji and Ardadine. Region after region of their brains was lit up in a way that he had learned meant intense thought.

"I move we put Benjamin in charge," Pandiji said abruptly. "With his far-seeing and through-seeing he's better equipped than either of us for command."

"Second the motion," Ardadine said. He leaned back and smiled.

"But I—I—" Benjamin pushed the hair back from his forehead. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

3

"YOU ASK about mutants," Benjamin said to the eager faces in front of him. He was addressing the group picked from his and the other prophets' followers. "Kill them. Kill them without question. It is a sin to let mutants live."

"What about the scientists themselves, lord?" one of the young men asked.

"If they have arms or make any resistance, they must be killed, of course. After we take the building that houses their clinic and main laboratory—" Benjamin tapped the sketch map on the table in front of him—"we'll have a house-to-house search in the Pasadena area and see how many more secret scientists we can root out. Most of them will have to be put out of the way too. But I don't want to tell you to kill scientists indiscriminately. It may be possible to spare a few if they sincerely repent."

His answer seemed to have satisfied them. There was a drop in the tension in the air. Somebody made a joke. A few people laughed. Benjamin's voice cut across the rising noise.

"Keep always in your minds that you are a dedicated group," he said impressively. "Your conduct tomorrow will make a turning point in your own and many other lives. Until tomorrow—good night." He held out his hands toward them in blessing.

They were awed and humbled. "Good night, lord," one or two mumbled back at him. They passed out slowly, looking sideways at him and whispering.

Benjamin watched them go. When the room was empty he stood for a moment thinking and then started across the field to the house he and Tobit slept in. It was a splendid house, with only one leak in the roof.

Tobit was waiting for him. "Where have you been, boy?" he

asked petulantly as soon as he appeared. "You never tell me anything nowadays. Don't you trust me any more?"

"Of course I do, grandfather," Benjamin said in a conciliatory tone. He was tired; he hoped there wouldn't be a quarrel with the old man.

"Well, then, where do you go every night? What are you doing? You ought to confide in me, Benjamin. I've given you lots of good advice."

The young man went over to where Tobit was standing and patted him kindly on the arm. "Let's go to bed, Tobit. We're both tired."

"I want to know what you're up to!"

"And I can't tell you. You've got to realize, Tobit, that I'm the prophet here. I'm grateful to you for what you've done for me, and I'll take care of you as long as you live. But that's all. Keep your curiosity, and your advice, to yourself. Good night." He turned and left the room.

Tobit stood looking after him, leaning with one hand against the table. His eyes held tears, the easy, weak tears of age, but his face was thoughtful and shrewd.

THE GRENADE which had killed the boy with the blue eyes had spattered Benjamin from head to foot with his follower's blood. When he looked at the splotches he felt a distant nausea which seemed to have no connection with his body. The pain in his head was so bad that he could hardly believe his skull had not been fractured though he knew it was no more than the natural consequence of a near miss by a stun gun.

For the tenth time Benjamin closed his eyes and tried to see into the building. What had gone wrong? They had attacked at dawn, expected at worst a slight and hasty resistance, and had been greeted with stun guns, gas, and later a shower of grenades. At least ten of his followers had died. More had been wounded. The scientists must have been forewarned.

If only he could see what was go-

ing on inside! But his closed-eye vision, usually so reliable, had dimmed and failed. Try as he might he could make out only monstrous blurs inside the building, and shapes moving them which might have been men.

The young follower crouched on the ground beside him pulled at the sleeve of Benjamin's robe. Fatigue and pain had etched harsh lines over the pallor of his young face. He kept one hand pressed to the still-oozing gash a bit of grenade shell had cut in his upper arm. But his eyes held unquestioning, dog-like, fidelity. "What shall we do now, lord?" he said.

Cautiously the prophet raised his head above the pile of rubble and looked. A momentary hush had come over the battle ground. The man with the stomach wound who had been crying for water for hours was silent. The paneless windows of the white laboratory building were quite blank. Nothing moved. Benjamin had time to notice that the sky was blue and cloudless, that the air was gentle and warm. Then a stun gun hissed maliciously from the top-most row of windows, and Benjamin ducked down again.

The young man beside him tugged once more at his sleeve. "Have you made up your mind, lord?" he asked.

The sensible thing was to order a retreat. Most of them, even the wounded, would get through. If it cost him prestige with his followers, a sermon or two against sin and the scientists would restore it again. Attack could be deferred to another day. But... Science was wrong. It was wrong to make even a temporary truce with it.

Desperately Benjamin pressed his hands together over his eyes. Before, he had tried to see into the building and guess the actions of its defenders; now he strained frantically to make out the construction of the building itself. Images swam slowly across the gray field of his vision and faded out again. He had a ghostly awareness of the writhing red veins at the back of his eyes. The pain in his skull was like an axe.

He took his hands down. Blood

was dropping slowly from where he had bitten his lower lip. "I'm going to try to get in through the back," he announced to the follower whose trustful eyes were fixed on him. "I think there's a small opening there with nobody watching it. I'll try to draw their fire from inside and give you a chance to attack. Pass the word along."

"Yes, lord." The boy hesitated. "Good fortune, lord."

Automatically Benjamin stretched out his hand toward him and mumbled a blessing. Then he crawled off dragging his spear after him. There was plenty of cover, but the jagged rubble was a torture to crawl over. The part of Benjamin's mind that was not watching the windows from which stun charges and grenades would come was speculating as to whether the cuts he was getting from the stone would infect. Infection, in a world where the bodies of millions rotted unburied, and even the disease germs had mutated, was a terribly easy thing.

HE HAD crawled nearly thirty yards when someone in the building saw him moving and threw a grenade at him. Benjamin hugged a pile of rubble and waited for the burst. It came, and then two, three, four more. The explosions stopped. From an upper window someone belowered through a megaphone, "Surrender and you will not be hurt! Surrender, and you will not be hurt!" There was a pause, and then more grenades.

Benjamin permitted himself the luxury of a bitter smile. The scientists must think them very simple indeed. Not be hurt? When everyone knew what the scientists did to helpless people in their laboratories? Neither he nor his men were such fools.

The dust settled slowly.

After a suitable interval he crawled on. This time he was more successful in avoiding notice. At a distance he rounded the corner of the building, skirted a body, came to the back.

No wonder the scientists were not guarding it. Windows and doors were heavily boarded, and the low

opening he had seen with his closed-eye vision—probably once a ventilator—had been overlooked because it was so small. Getting into it would be difficult, though he thought it could be done.

Benjamin shut his eyes and looked. For some reason shut-eye seeing was better here than in front, though still dim and streaked, and he made out the shape of the ventilator going inside the wall for a foot or two before it broke.

Was there anyone about? Not in the basement, but on the first floor a girl sat at the head of the stairs. She was reading a thin book with paper covers, and a stun gun stood by her hand. He would have to figure on disabling her before she gave the alarm. He mustn't be noticed before he was ready to create his diversion.

He began to creep forward. It occurred to him, with a touch of unreality, that he probably would not get out of the laboratory building alive. The ventilator opening seemed a long way off.

He was nearly to it when a faint sound behind him alarmed him. He started to turn. Before he could complete the motion there came a stunning, obliterating pain in his head.

And Tobit, some seventy yards in the rear, lay down his stun gun with a satisfied smile.

"WHY DIDN'T you confide in me, boy?" Tobit complained. "If I'd only known what was going on, I'd have warned you against the others. You're too trusting. They're a bunch of snakes."

Benjamin groaned. He opened his eyes. The room—small, white painted, without visible openings—began to rotate giddily. He closed them again.

After a moment he held on to the iron rail of the cot on which he was lying and sat up. The room, though still moving of its own accord, was beginning to slow down. "I'm thirsty," Benjamin said. "Where am I? What are you doing here? I wish I had a drink."

Tobit trotted over to a table which stood by the wall and held a glass

carafe. He poured water into a plastic cup. "Here," he said, "here's some water for you. —Why, you're inside the laboratory building. We've been captured. We're hostages."

Thirstily Benjamin drank. He put down the empty glass. "Hostages?" he repeated. "Tobit, what are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I'd stay at home while you were in danger, did you, Benjamin? This morning I got out of Maida what she thought you were up to, and I followed you. Oh, if you'd only told me before! Pandiji and Ardadine set a trap for you, and like a baby you walked into it."

"You mean they warned the scientists?" Benjamin asked.

"Of course they did," Tobit replied eagerly. "They were afraid you'd have too much prestige if you defeated the scientists. You've been doing so well in the prophet line they were jealous of you. So they tipped off the people in the laboratory, figuring that even if you weren't killed you'd be set back quite a bit. They're smart, and it was a smart idea."

Benjamin nodded slowly. He was remembering the smile Ardadine had worn at the meeting that night. From Ardadine's and Pandiji's viewpoint, a conflict in which both Benjamin and the scientists would suffer was ideal.

"Next time you'll tell your old grandfather things," Tobit went on with a touch of severity. "Why, you might have been killed if I hadn't been here to save your life. A fine business! After this you'll realize that you're just a boy and still need my advice."

Benjamin got weakly to his feet and stood leaning against the wall. There was an almost unbearable pain over and behind his eyes. "Saved my life. How?" he asked. "The last thing I remember is that somebody hit me with a charge from a stun gun."

"One of the scientists hit you from around the corner of the building," Tobit answered with alacrity. "Then they started throwing grenades at you, but they all fell short. I knew

they'd get you sooner or later if you stayed there, so I crawled up to you and managed to drag you back behind a pile of rubble where I knew you'd be safe. You're a mighty heavy load when you're unconscious, boy. You owe me a great deal."

"Thank you," Benjamin said awkwardly. "I suppose I do. The way my head feels now, I'd almost rather you'd left me lying there. What happened after that?"

"After that?"

"How did we get to be hostages?"

"Oh. Well, I stayed there for a while with you, wondering what to do. I couldn't drag you any further and I didn't know how much longer you'd be unconscious. I decided to crawl back to where your followers were and see if I could get some of them to help me move you. I hadn't gone more than a couple of feet when three scientists came around the corner. They were carrying stun guns, and each of them had a little thing attached to his head that gave out a sort of waterfall of sparks. Your followers were throwing spears and stones at them, and shooting at them with their bows, but nothing got through. I suppose the things on their heads were portable force-field projectors—they were one of the science things people had, Benjamin, before your time.

"When they got up to where we were they turned the guns on me and told me to surrender or be stunned. And then they picked you up and carried you inside and made me come along behind. After we were inside the building they called through the megaphone and told your followers they were holding you as hostage for their good behavior. There's been no more fighting, but your followers are still there."

BENJAMIN gave Tobit a bitter look. "I wish you'd let them kill me, grandfather," he said.

"Oh, come now, it's not so bad. You've lost some prestige by being captured, of course, but you can escape. And when your followers see

you coming out of the science building safe and sound and free as air, they'll respect you more than ever before. They'll really appreciate your powers."

"Get out? How? My powers don't include getting through a solid wall."

"Of course not. But you can see through the wall and figure how to get out that way. There's nobody on guard outside this room, and there's a keyhole in the door panel on this side. Look into the lock and see how it works."

"I can't. Something's happened to my closed-eye vision. Most of the time I can't see anything."

For the first time Tobit seemed jarred. "But—but—" he stammered. "Why, boy, you've got to get out of here! You've got to! They'll do all sorts of horrible things to us if we stay."

"I know. That's why I said it would have been better if they'd killed me with the grenades. It's a clean, quick, death. When a true prophet falls into these devils' hands..."

There was a protracted fumbling at the door. Then the lock gave a click and a woman came in. It was the same girl Benjamin had seen in the hall; he recognized the way her fine dark hair curled around her face, and the vivid tilt of her head. In one hand she carried a stun gun, the barrel at "discharge", and in the other a tray of food. She pushed the tray into Benjamin's hands (Tobit, he noticed, had walked into a corner and stood facing the wall), looked at him unsmilingly for a moment, and then backed out, her gun still trained on him.

Tobit turned around, sniffing the steam from the tray. "Well, my boy," he said cheerfully, "they're not going to starve us to death, at any rate. What's that? Bread? Yes, I believe it is. Well, well! I hate to think how long it's been since I had any bread."

He pulled chairs up to the table and they sat down. "So that's bread," Benjamin said, examining it. "Being scientists, I suppose they can have all sorts of luxuries. I don't care

much for it myself, though. It looks gritty and full of burrs."

Tobit picked up a slab of the grayish stuff and bit into it. "Maybe so," he said with his mouth full, "but it tastes good to me. If you don't want your share, my boy..."

Between them they finished the food on the tray. Benjamin had been hungrier than he had thought, and eating had somewhat blunted the pain in his head. A drawing sensation in his leg made him pull his robe up and look at it. The worst of his cuts had been bandaged, and the skin around the others had been painted with some greenish stuff.

"It's an antiseptic," Tobit explained. "People used to put it on wounds to see they didn't infect. Now, Benjamin, how about trying to get out of here? You never can tell until you try."

Docilely the young man closed his eyes. "I can see better than I could," he reported after an instant. "Maybe it was being shot with the stun gun that made me lose my through-seeing, and now the effect's wearing off."

"Good! Good! Look at the lock."

Benjamin went over and squatted in front of it. "There's a thing like this," he said frowning and sketching a shape with his finger on the surface of the door, "and it comes out and hooks into a bunch of little knobs. Then there's another thing at the top with ridges. I think it's supposed to move when you push against the little knobs. If I had a piece of stiff wire I could try to bend it into the right shape."

He looked around the room. After a second he found what he wanted in the plastic-coated wire someone had used to mend the handle of a spoon. He stripped it off and began to work.

SHAPING the key itself was not so difficult, but it took him a good deal of experiment to discover that the key must be turned first to the right, then half around to the left, and then back to the right again. Once or twice he had to stop

work when someone went by in the hall. His hands were trembling with strain when he got the door open at last.

Beside him, Tobit exhaled a great sigh of relief. "Wonderful!" he whispered. "Let's go!"

"Wait a minute." Benjamin went over to the cot and unscrewed one of the iron slats. He came back with the bar in his hand. "For a weapon," he explained.

They stole out into the hall. Benjamin kept shutting his eyes and looking to see whether anyone was coming. After they had gone about thirty feet he pulled Tobit abruptly against the wall. "Somebody in the cross corridor," he whispered into the old man's ear. "I can't quite see. If they come this way..." He hefted the cot leg in his hand.

Light footfalls moved toward them. Benjamin was holding his breath. As the passer came abreast of them he leaned out with the bar and swung.

Something made him deflect part of the force of the blow. The bar hit the top of the girl's head and glanced down to her shoulder. She collapsed without a sound.

"Kill her!" Tobit whispered fiercely to him. "It's the girl who brought the tray. She's dangerous. Hit her again!"

Benjamin faltered. Then he leaned down and tore a strip from the hem of his robe. "We'll gag her and tie her up," he whispered back. "I don't like to kill a woman even if she is a scientist."

The girl came to while she was being tied. She fought them weakly, struggling against the gag. Her eyes were full of pain and wrath.

When she was bound to Benjamin's satisfaction, Tobit opened a closet and they pushed her in. "We've got to hurry, boy," Tobit muttered. "Keep shutting your eyes and looking. If they catch us after this..."

The stairs creaked alarmingly, but the two negotiated them in safety. In the lower hall Benjamin stood pondering, trying to guess which way to go. His closed-eye vision was

flickering again, but he knew there were people very near.

"This way, I think," he said at last. They moved to the right. In the next hall he halted again, frowning intently. The walls and floors were vibrating to a distant hum. "Which way now?" Tobit asked, looking up anxiously into his face.

"I—I—Tobit, I don't know, There's nothing but blackness. I've lost my vision." Benjamin's face was a mask of misery. "I've gone blind."

4

THIS TIME the scientists mounted a guard over them. An elderly woman and a much younger man, both armed with stun guns, stood before the door. There could be no question of escape this time.

Tobit paced up and down the little room restlessly, gnawing at his nails, wringing his hands. Benjamin had never seen him so agitated. His nerves seemed to be strung on wires.

"What's the matter?" he asked at last. "No matter what they do to us, Tobit, we must be brave. Even if it takes a long time to die."

"Oh, be quiet," Tobit snapped. "You don't know what you're talking about. Don't believe anything the scientists say, Benjamin. They're liars, cheats, connivers, all of them." He resumed his restless pacing of the floor.

It grew dark. Lights in the ceiling came on. Benjamin, who had never seen anything except torches after dark, stared at them. "Where do the lights come from?" he asked Tobit at last.

"Fluors," the old man jerked out. "Building has its own power supply. Can't you be quiet? I want to think. —Listen, do you hear somebody in the hall?"

The door opened and the girl with the gun appeared. "You're to go down to see Hess," she told them soberly. "If you try to escape, you'll

be shot." Benjamin noticed with a curious throb of emotion that there was a bandage around her head.

They started down the hall, the girl behind them, the other guards falling in on either side. Benjamin walked firmly, his head up, but Tobit bounced and teetered and hopped along at his side in a perfect convulsion of nerves. Benjamin was glad when they came to Hess' door.

Hess was a stocky man with a bristling reddish moustache. He sat at a table in a big, white-painted room with blackboards on the walls. It might have been a schoolroom once. The night air came in through the glassless window openings. On either side of Hess was a mutated man.

The one on the right had boneless, rubbery tentacles in place of human arms, but otherwise he seemed normal enough. The one on the left... Benjamin licked his lips and swallowed to keep down his gorge. The creature's head was set between its shoulders, with a red-rimmed disk for mouth, and the skin that covered its distorted body was spotted and rough like a toad's, a snake's. Benjamin had once killed a snake that was marked just so. It was horrible to see human fingers covered with a snake's skin.

"Otto has ophidian pigmentation," Hess said, following the direction of Benjamin's gaze. He put down his pencil and looked up at the young man. "I wish we could let you go," he said wistfully. "We really can't afford to feed two extra mouths, and keeping you under guard all the time is going to make us short-handed in the lab. On the other hand, if we turn you loose you're sure to stir up those people outside and attack us, and we can't have that. We dislike killing them, and you have no idea what a nuisance an attack like the one this morning is." He sighed.

"By the way," he said, his eyes brightening, "would you mind telling me how you got out of that room? We've been wondering."

Tobit twitched in a spasm of excitement. "I have through-seeing,"

Benjamin answered. His head was proudly erect. The scientists and their mutants should learn what real powers were. "I looked into the lock and saw how it was made. It wasn't so hard to unlock it after that."

"You did?" Hess said, cocking his head on one side. "You know, that's very interesting. You mean you can see through walls and so on?"

"Yes. I have far-seeing, too, and far-hearing part of the time." Benjamin frowned. "Something in this place spoils my seeing, though," he went on, making up his mind to continue. "It must be some of the science machines. I can't see anything but black. It's worst outside that room with the hum."

"Oh, really?" Hess said. "I suppose you mean the room with the cosmic ray apparatus. How very odd! It almost looks as if... H'um. If you stay with us, we must try some experiments with you, a lot of them."

HESS MADE a note on the paper in front of him. Benjamin felt his hands growing cold. "Experiments"—he knew what that meant.

Hess put his pencil down again. "As for you, Tobit," he said with sudden severity, "I must ask you to explain yourself. You undertook to deliver this young man to us as a hostage—heavens knows where you got the gun you shot him with—I don't—and you did so. As far as that goes, we're grateful. But today you joined him actively in attacking Miriam. In fact, she says that you several times urged what's his name, Benjamin, to kill her and have done with her. What's your game? Which side are you on? We don't much care for traitors here."

Tobit was wringing his hands. "Benjamin, boy," he said desperately, "don't believe—"

Benjamin looked at him like a sleepwalker. The pupils of his eyes had grown small. "So you stunned me after all," he said tonelessly. "Yes. I *thought* that shot came from behind."

"I—they're lying, Benjamin! Don't let them hurt me, boy!"

Hess got to his feet. "I told you

to explain yourself," he said peremptorily. His easy, cultured voice had grown hard.

Tobit looked frantically around the circle of cold faces which regarded him. His feverish eyes were darting about like a trapped animal's. "I—I—I—" he chattered. For a moment he stood dancing in indecision, beating his old hands together. Then he sucked in his breath and ran.

"Stop him!" Hess shouted to the guards. Tobit was running toward the window. "Don't let him get out!"

The dry, malicious hiss of the stun guns responded instantly. Tobit ran two steps further and then spun round. The stun guns hissed again. He pitched abruptly forward on his face. Everyone ran toward him. Hess got there first.

"Blast it, did you all have to stun him at once?" he said angrily to the three with the guns. "The human brain isn't meant to receive..."

He got down on his knees beside the little man and felt for his pulse. "Yes, he's done for," he said in a moment. "He was dead before he stopped running. Three guns, even at half power, were too much." He made a regretful, dismissing gesture, and looked up at Benjamin. "He's really done for. His brain's burned out."

"DON'T YOU understand about Tobit yet, Benjamin?" Miriam asked. Since the PAS (he had learned that the initials stood for Pasadena Association of Scientists) was not willing to release him, Benjamin had been a prisoner for several days. He and the girl had begun to talk to each other a little, though with bad grace and warily. "Don't you know what he was trying to do?"

"Oh, it isn't that," Benjamin answered. "I know, now, that he was only using me. In a sense, I've known it all along." He looked down at his sandals and his bare toes. "He wanted me to get power—power and material comforts, for him; and when he thought I was getting out from under his thumb he took pains to see I got back there again. That's

why he shot me and turned me over to you. He thought he'd make me grateful to him by claiming to have saved my life, and he could argue that all my difficulties came from not confiding in him. He was only using me. It's unpleasant knowing it, though. By the way, I suppose he told you we were going to attack?"

Miriam shook her dark head. "No, it was Ardadine and Pandiji who warned us. Tobit wouldn't have; there was too much danger you'd be killed, and he wanted you alive."

She sat down on the edge of the table and began swinging her smooth brown legs. "Did you know he wasn't really your grandfather?" she asked abruptly.

Benjamin stared at her. "Yes, he was," he replied after a pause.

"No, he wasn't," Miriam contradicted. "Hess was talking about it last night. I didn't follow the details of the argument, but it seems he couldn't have been your grandfather and had eyes the color they were—something about genetics. Hess says he thinks, from what you've told him, that your father was the son of a Dr. Roberts who used to be on the campus here before the first bombs came."

There was a sharp rap at the door. "Hess wants to know when you're going to bring the young man down," an acidulous feminine voice said through the panel.

Miriam jumped to her feet. "Oh, dear," she said to Benjamin, "I was supposed to take you down to talk to him about the experiments." And then, through the door, "We're coming, Emily."

The word "experiments" diverted Benjamin's mind from what he had just heard about Tobit. As he walked down the stair between his guards his mouth was dry. So far, the scientists had done nothing to him except testing his closed-eye vision and his far-hearing. But for all their seeming friendliness they were scientists. They had mutants working beside them in their laboratories. It might be that now the *real* experiments were about to begin.

"Hello, Benjamin," Hess said, looking up at him. "Won't you sit

down? ... You know, I think we've found out what makes you tick."

BENJAMIN sat down stiffly on the edge of the chair. "You mean you admit that I really do have powers?" he asked.

"Oh, certainly. There never was any doubt about that. What we wanted was to find out just what your powers were, and how they worked.

"We're not sure about your far-hearing just yet. But we've all been over the results we got with your closed-eye vision, and we think there's only one conclusion possible. The retina of your eyes is sensitive to cosmic rays."

"Cosmic rays?" Benjamin asked.

"Yes. They're a high-frequency type of radiation which originates outside—well, there's no use in bothering you with that until you've learned more about radiation generally. The important thing to remember is that cosmic rays penetrate matter quite freely. Of course there are differences in permeability. I imagine what you get is a good deal like the way ordinary light goes through panes of glass. It penetrates it, but it's quite possible to tell whether glass is thin or thick."

Hess fidgeted with his pencil a moment and then laid it down. He cleared his throat. "I'm going to make you a proposition, Benjamin," he said. "You haven't had much education, but you're intelligent. I believe we have only scratched the surface with that closed-eye vision of yours. A person with your qualifications could be extremely useful to us. Benjamin, how would you like to join the PAS?"

"... Be a scientist?"

"Eventually, yes."

Benjamin goggled at him. His mind was whirling. He grasped at idea after idea; it was like a man, bare-handed, trying to catch fish. Even speech was slippery and eluded him. "You have mutants working with you," he said at last.

"Oh, that." Hess gave a rather sad smile. He went over to the window and looked out. "I think all your followers have gone home by now," he said. "There were only one or two left last night.

"—About the mutants. Most people have the idea that you have, Benjamin, that mutants are people like Otto and Bardway, people with tentacles or ophidian skin.

"Those are only the extreme cases. There's a very sizeable number of humans who look normal enough but have mutated either in small ways or in ways that don't show. Miriam, for example." He motioned toward the girl who was standing with head bowed, fingering her gun. "She hasn't any vermiform appendix. Most mutations aren't even suspected by the people who have them. Your far-seeing is a case in point. You're a mutant yourself, Benjamin."

Benjamin stood up. He had grown quite white. "No," he said. "No. No."

Hess looked at him quietly. "Yes," he said. "What else could it be? It's a rare mutation, but you're not unique, Benjamin. I've seen one other person with it. Unfortunately, he was an idiot."

Benjamin made a stiff gesture. For a second his eyes closed. Then he turned and began walking blankly toward the door. He planted each foot slowly and mechanically. Miriam and Emily, guns ready, sprang to bar his way.

"It's all right," Hess said to the two women. "Let him through."

Unopposed Benjamin passed out into the hall. Miriam looked after him ruefully. "Do you really mean to let him go, Hess?" she asked. "He could be so useful to us, and now we'll never see him again."

"Yes, we will." Hess went up to Miriam and patted her affectionately on the shoulder. "Don't worry about him, my dear. There's good stuff in him, but he's had a terrific shock. His world has broken into pieces. The heavens are falling on his head.

"But there's good stuff in him. He's old Dr. Roberts' grandson, remember. He's intelligent. Some day soon, it might be tomorrow or the next day or the next, he'll come back to join us. Don't worry, Miriam. He'll be back."

THE END



Middlebrook caught the picture of a woman. She was ill, and he had the feeling she was in some sort of medical amphitheatre. There was an impression of lights...

THE GRAY CLOUD

by Walter Kubiľius

(author of "Caridi Shall Not Die")

The tenth atomic bomb explosion brought about a reaction that hadn't been considered before . . . and it wasn't a chain reaction.

THERE WAS a sharp rap on the door. Hurriedly Dr. Jennings tossed the roll of graph paper into a desk drawer. "Come in" he said, locking the desk. He quickly glanced about his office to see if any other graph rolls had been left.

Middlebrook slammed the door shut as he walked in. His fat beefy face already bore the pink evidence of hypertension; an X-ray would also show the professional badge of the busy executive, the stomach ulcer.

"Taking the night plane back to New York," Middlebrook said briskly, "Reconsidered our offer? Big money in it, you know."

Dr. Jennings shook his head. "The proposition doesn't interest me. Tell the corporation that I'm not for sale. My work in thought-pattern reading is pure science, and I have no intention of letting any private company or war-minded bureaucracy get their hands on it."

Middlebrook ignored his words. He pulled out a heavy chair and sat down at the desk facing the tired doctor. From his pocket he drew out the evening edition of the local newspaper and flung it upon the desk. The front page with its garish headline, *Tenth Atom Bomb Explodes!* opened before Jennings. The doctor closed his eyes as if in pain; he turned his head away and looked through the window. A few miles away he could see the mine-shaft in which he had plunged the mile-long electrode. Overhead were a few gray clouds.

"Big things happening in the world," Middlebrook said, "Why bury yourself in this coal-mining country nut house? We could use a top-notch man like you in our Cybernetics Division. With your knowledge of the electrical circuits of the nervous system, and my company's electronic computing machine laboratories, we could build the finest mechanical brain in the world. Each brain can have in it the elements to build a better brain. There's no telling where we would stop!"

"Not interested," Jennings said. Would the fool never go away? Jennings was not interested in building mechanical brains, when that graph paper locked within his desk carried the thought patterns of a brain so vast that it was beyond all understanding. Billions of paltry human minds put together could not add up to one lobe of that great brain whose secrets he had tapped.

Middlebrook's lips tightened, but when he spoke his voice was again mild, coaxing, and even gently patronizing. Underneath, however, lay a subtle threat and warning that Jennings was quick to recognize. "Why are you wasting your time in thought-pattern work in this hole?" he demanded, "What can you possibly discover in experimenting with improved encephalographs for a bunch of catatonics and schizophrenics? Good Lord, look at you! Overworked, exhausted, and worn out from handling trivialities. With us, you would have the finest lab and the finest assistants in the coun-

(Illustration by Poulton)
2.

try. Right now you're so tired that you're hardly able to pay any attention to me. Hell, man, your face looks as if you saw the end of the world!"

Dr. Jennings turned swiftly, his face suddenly flushing. He glanced down at the newspaper where the word *Tenth* drew his eye as a magnet.

Perhaps Middlebrook was right; maybe he did work too hard. He felt exhausted and his eyes were tired. Studying the thought patterns on that roll of graph paper in his desk had tired him too much. His imagination was beginning to run away. He was seeing parallels and significance where there may not be any. His "translator" might be a failure and the ideas which so terrified him were probably only the imaginings of his over-worked mind.

He knew he had to test them, to have them experienced by an unimaginative clod, by a man who was practical, cold-blooded, and unemotional. A man like Middlebrook, for example!

HE LOOKED up at him. "Do you really want to know what is keeping me here?" he asked quietly.

Middlebrook faced him. His eyes were cold stones. "Yes," he said bluntly, "I want to know. I want to know why your medical histories are faked; they are only a front to cover up some other work you are doing. You order quantities of steel, chromium, tungsten, and other metals that are altogether out of proportion to the number of encephalographs you build. Why do you send those machines to the abandoned coal mine? What are you building there? What have you found out that has practically terrified you? What's behind it all?"

"Simple," Jennings said, "I was one of the crew that visited Hiroshima."

There was a blank look on Middlebrook's face. "So?" he demanded.

"I saw what the atom bomb did and I vowed never to do anything

which might be turned to military advantage."

Middlebrook relaxed as if he was about to hear an argument that he could easily answer.

"I made up my mind," Jennings went on, "to use whatever knowledge I had concerning the human brain for the promotion of peace and understanding between men."

"We're not looking for any offensive, destructive weapons," Middlebrook said; "the atom bomb is enough. All we want to do is to develop a brain that can out-think, out-reason, and out-invent any and every foreign power."

"So I came here," Jennings went on, as if his thoughts were in another world, "to build a machine that could read the human mind, and make a book out of the human soul."

Middlebrook stared at him. "Were it not for your reputation in cybernetics," he said, "I would think you've cracked. There's no such thing as a mind-reading machine; it's impossible."

For the first time, Jennings smiled. At last he was beginning to unload the sequence of events which led to the capture of "Her" thought patterns. Perhaps he was wrong in his interpretation of them. He clung to this feeble hope, desperately anxious that a clod like Middlebrook, with a mind unfettered by imagination, would see through it and find a practical, simple answer where Jennings could not.

"Know anything about thought waves?" Jennings asked mildly.

"Enough to know that there's no such thing as mind-reading," Middlebrook snorted.

"I felt so, too," Jennings said, "until I began to study in more detail the curves on the encephalographic charts made by my patients in the sanitarium. It is simple enough to measure any radical change in thought patterns by the use of electrodes on the patient's skull. The radiations emitted by electronic patterns within the human brain can thus be captured and recorded on graph paper. The basic principle is

commonly understood, but as yet no one had constructed encephalographs of such sensitivity that they can record every thought, and not merely radical departures from the average."

He paused and watched Middlebrook's calm, and slightly contemptuous face. The secret he had kept hidden so carefully would now be given to this military-minded corporation agent. Before long the Army would hear of it and Jennings' isolation and independence would be ended.

"The infinite number of electrical patterns for an infinite number of ideas and sensations produce an enormous number of patterns on the graphs. My work here has been to codify these patterns so that they can be read, and then to reverse the process so that they can be translated electronically and verbalized in my own mind."

"Good idea," Middlebrook said, a shade of doubt in his voice as if he did not see any wide implications in the plan.

Jennings sighed. The bureaucratic mind had no imagination. You had to draw a diagram with clear and simple labels before any new idea could register.

"Let me show you how it works," he said finally.

HANDS ENCASED in rubber, and sterile gown and mask securely in place, Dr. Jennings prepared the uneasy Middlebrook for the demonstration. Small spots were shaved clean on his head and electrodes attached to the exposed skin. Gleaming styli emerged from a mass of pulsating tanks and their stained points pressed multi-colored lines upon a roll of moving graph paper.

"Looks like an ordinary lie detector," Middlebrook said uneasily.

Jennings shrugged his shoulders. "This will be something like the word-association test," he said, "but instead of responding to any words or questions, you will remain silent."

"Clear enough. Go ahead."

"Black." Electrical patterns form-

ing in Middlebrook's brain actuated the sensitive electrodes attached to his head. Amplified, the currents passed on to a shifting stylus whose moving finger wrote a jagged line upon the roll. This would by the symbol for *white*.

"Boy."

Again a stylus moved to indicate a word, *girl*. Jennings quickly ran down the word association list to check the accuracy of the machine, and his own ability to read the chart.

"Suppose I am telling you the truth and this is really a mind-reading machine? What do you think could be done with it?"

Just supposing. Middlebrook thought, *Well, it would be the biggest thing for Military Intelligence. All we need to do is capture one operative, or a few technicians from the enemy and all their secrets would be ours. Nothing could be hidden any more. Every fortification, armament factory, rocket port, and technical center would eventually be known to us. The whole world would be ours! And say, if this is really a mind reader, I suppose he'll find out that I'm from Army Intelligence sent to check up on him, and that 'Middlebrook' is only a phony name. If he's right, we in the Army could use a gadget like this.*

Jennings switched the line of questioning. When the test was finished, Jennings read the graph as one would read the printed page and told the baffled Army officer—Middlebrook—what had gone on in his mind. The condescending look was wiped away and in its place was the realization that in this small machine lay the power to rule the Earth.

"This is big," he said softly, "big."

"Then you also know why I will not permit the Army or anyone else to get their hands on it. If this is to be of any value, it must be distributed to all nations simultaneously. When there are no secrets, surprise attacks and hypocritical pretenses of peaceful intentions would become impossible."

Middlebrook shook his head. "It's

too big. I'm phoning Washington. You'll be drafted and put in the army before sunrise."

Jennings glanced toward the window where the gray clouds could be seen. Was his imagination playing tricks? They seemed to come from outer space and they were growing bigger.

"There's more to this machine," he said, turning back to the officer; "I haven't showed you the translator. Since this encephalograph converts thought patters into marked lines on a graph, it should also be possible to reverse the process."

"You mean a machine which will write down words instead of graph lines?"

"That's possible, too, but what I have built is a sort of thought creator, an apparatus to instill ideas within the mind. It enables the brain to act as a receiving station for thought images given to it by the encephalograph."

Taking out a key he unlocked the desk drawer and removed the rolled-up graph that had given him a vision of the ending of the world. There was an air of resignation about him, and a heavy weariness around his shoulders.

"This is a thought-pattern whose images I have been absorbing through the 'translator.' Each of these lines will actuate a stylus and by the fluctuations of various electronic fields, will stimulate your own mind so that you too will experience the thoughts which are captured here on paper."

"One of your patients?"

Middlebrook's hand trembled. "You will notice," he said, his voice uneasy, "that the lines on this graph resemble somewhat a seismographic chart."

"Now that you mention it, yes. You're sure you haven't slipped in an earthquake record by mistake? Seriously though, if I understand your machine correctly, it will create in my mind those thoughts made by your patient?"

"Substantially, but remember that we think in words. The machine can work equally well on a mind using

a foreign language. It is your own mind which verbalizes thought, so it would seem that the being whose patterns I have here thought in a language you know. Ready?"

"Ready."

There was a purr as the motor was turned on, and then a slight scratching as the stylus began to follow the graph lines. Jennings had not told the whole story. He still withheld the identity of the Being whose thought patterns now formed within Middlebrook's brain.

THE BEING—so the thought patterns impressed themselves upon the mind of Middlebrook, as they did when Jennings first read the results of his experiments with the planting of a gigantic electrode in the shaft of a deep, abandoned mine—was a woman. She was fertile, young, and in some indefinable way, beautiful. It was strange that he felt this so sharply for there was no image whatever in his mind that suggested a definite physical body, face, or feature. Rather he caught the illusion of spherical perfection—the music of the spheres as some poet said.

She was nameless, and her presence was near. He was conscious of her thoughts, and these were filled with a terror that swept over Middlebrook in shocking, tearing waves.

She was ill. She felt no pain but knew from the case histories of others, that her disease was fatal. She seemed to be in the center of some circling medical amphitheatre and all around her, as if watching from a balcony, were those of her friends and physicians who had come to see the disposition of her case.

"Would you call me bloodthirsty?" the surgeon said. "I resent the implication of the doctor that I am in any way vindictively eager to destroy this poor afflicted woman. But what other course is there? Nine times within a few moments the rash has broken out on her body, and thus we have nine distinct proofs that she is infected with the germ."

"But the germ has never been seen," her physician protested.

"Virus, then, not germ," the surgeon said. "The disease can be transmitted; we have proved this in the laboratory. There is no immunity. Time and time again we have noted that as soon as the disease struck it instantly assumed crisis proportions and soon spread to other individuals. We cannot isolate. We cannot immunize. We can do nothing but destroy each patient as soon as the disease manifests itself. All of us may even at this moment be infected by her presence here. I ask the assembly that we mercifully destroy her, and in this way exterminate the virus that now infects her."

The physician prepared to restate the case. No attempt had been made to study the actual nature of the virus. It was true that violent death usually followed the tenth, and sometimes the twentieth or thirtieth outbreak. But were nine individual examples of the disease's presence on

her body enough? Would it not be best to study the patient—no matter the risk—before destroying her? The virus had to be isolated and studied, and a specific found before it killed them all. Frantic efforts to kill every patient were failing. Instant execution was no longer the answer.

But the physician's arguments were not heeded, for at that moment there was a cry of pain from the woman. The surgeon, the physicians, and the entire medical amphitheatre turned and looked upon her. In one instant the rash had broken out and soon faded, the putrescent mass of poison flowed invisibly around her body. This was the tenth outbreak, the tenth proof that she was infected.

"Kill her!" the surgeon screamed, "let loose the Gray Cloud upon her and kill the virus before it kills us all!"

THE SENSE of terror which leaped through Middlebrook's mind brought sweat to his forehead.



"They think we're animals with no human drives or courage!"

"All of us know what a small chance I have of succeeding. I can only try to pass as one of them, and bring you back the atomfire metal in such quantity that we can all live again."

Don't miss this suspenseful feature novel

OUT OF THE ATOMFIRE

by Bryce Walton and Ross Rocklynne

He ripped off the headset and electrodes and sent them clattering to the floor. His clothes were wet from fright, and his face had turned pale.

"Who is she?" he demanded, trembling as he arose from his chair, "Who is she?"

Jennings felt a sinking wave of fear. He knew that his interpretation of the thought-patterns was correct.

"I had a theory," he began softly, "and it has proved itself. You remember the childish poem about fleas having little fleas upon them, and so on ad infinitum?"

"Sure I have heard it, but so what?"

"Suppose we reverse it? Imagine for a moment that just as various bacteria and germs infect us, so do we infect someone else?"

"There's no one," Middlebrook said angrily; "this is nonsense."

"Suppose," Jennings went on, "that this Earth we live on is not a lifeless mass of stone, but a living sentient being with a mind and soul just as we have? Would we not be germs upon such a body? Would not our activities be considered 'disease' by such a being?"

"But that is nonsense. Rocks don't live or breathe as we do!"

"Not as we do, no. But we need not be the only form of life. The germs within our bodies do not live or breathe as we do, yet they are real. The Earth, the Moon, the Sun, the very stars in the sky, they do not live or breathe as we do but they are alive!"

"You're insane!"

"Do you think so?" Jennings demanded, "Whose thought patterns did you feel? Not from a patient in the san, I assure you. They were gathered from the impulses assembled by a giant electrode planted in the mine. They were the thoughts of the Earth itself as it, and the Beings around it, realized that the Earth is infected with a deadly disease—the human race!"

"I—I can't see it that way."

"No? Think of those nine 'rashes' the surgeon talked of. They are the nine atomic bomb explosions upon the face of the Earth. As for the

tenth 'rash' that led to their decision to kill the patient with the 'Gray Cloud', you have only to look at this newspaper: *Tenth Atom Bomb Explodes!* From the other thoughts we can learn another startling fact. The Earth is not the only world that is infested with human life. You heard the Surgeon say that after 20 or 30 manifestations of the disease, the patient is usually killed by the virus. What does that mean but that atomic warfare, towards which we are racing, is big enough to kill a living planet? How many worlds encircling dead stars have been brutally murdered by living species, like Mankind, which develop atomic energy and then in their blindness destroy themselves and the living world they inhabit? We are the virus! We are the disease which has infected the Earth!"

Middlebrook shook his head, but he could not shake off the knowledge that the things Jennings said were true. The agony of the Woman patient had seared through him, and he knew beyond all doubt that the "Woman" was the Earth itself. She was doomed by whatever stars in heaven served as surgeons and executioners of those whose bodies were infested with Life.

IN SILENCE they looked out of the window and across the great plains where night was falling. The evening stars had come out in all their glory and the eternal Milky Way looked like a circling medical amphitheatre surrounding the Earth.

"Astronomers," Jennings said quietly, "have long been familiar with galactic dust clouds which obscure the lights of suns a thousand times stronger than Sol. Is the orbit of the Earth now about to enter such a cloud?"

They looked at the horizon. A few gray clouds seemed to be growing with startling rapidity.

The verdict of the surgeon had been given, and the patient was about to be sterilized so that the virus which infected it would be destroyed.

THE END



(Illustrated
by Luros)

Lara felt herself caught, lifted against all her fury...

The Last Lunacy

by Lester del Rey

(author of "Shadows of Empire")

Whoever held the moon, ruled Earth. And the rulers found a way to bring the moon monstrously close to Earth, without a break-up. But if the moon could be moved one way, it could be moved another...

LARA SHIVERED in the breeze that was stirring, and the scant covering she wore barely moved in it, a few bits of gauze stirring with the moving air. She stared at them, trying to realize that here on the surface of the earth the breeze was normal, not a sign of something passing nearby. It was cold, after the uniform Lunar shelter, but she had been warned of that.

Now she crouched down, peering over the rubble that clogged what had once been a great street. There were only the buildings, and no signs of movement. Seen from a distance, as when she landed her tiny flitter, the buildings had seemed unharmed; from this spot, the pits and cracks showed all too plainly. She wondered how the Blues could live here in the shadow of the Great Builders and think no more of the buildings than possible shelters.

But above her, the gigantic sphere of the moon shown down, reminding her that she had work to do. She shivered again, took a last quick look down the street, and dashed rapidly into the shadow of a building.

It wasn't so bad there, though she missed the brightness of the fluorescents on Luna. For a moment, she paused with her eyes closed, to let her near-eidetic memory paint the ancient map for her. The subway—whatever it was—had run underground here, and reports had indicated it was still open.

She had trouble finding the entrance, but the map had been right;

it was easier going there, with cautious uses of her infra-red night-scanner. She could almost welcome the smell of mold and decay that permeated the tunnel.

Half an hour slow travelling led her near where the Attractor lay. She breathed easier, scanning carefully for the hidden entrance. She wasn't sure at first; then her eyes made out the cracks, and she moved forward, unconsciously shaking the hair back from a face she knew to be completely beautiful in a regal way as she prepared to fulfill her mission.

The heavy hands that caught her throat were noiseless—and stronger than human muscles could be. A grunt sounded, and the grip on her neck tightened, until her breath was completely cut off.

Then her attacker paused, running hard hands over her body. She struggled again and the shock of the sensations lent fresh fury to her efforts. But the hands had loosened.

"I'll be damned!" The voice was deep, firm, and as shocked as her own mind. Sudden yellow light sprang on, and she saw a blue hand going down from a helmet of some sort, while a yellow nimbus surrounded the blue body. He shook his head, staring at her, and his muscular hands swung her around, while his eyes made a careful study of every feature, until the scraps of clothing seemed to vanish before them. "A woman! A Lunatic!"

She tried to make her voice commanding, cutting off the fear, and succeeded. "A Master, Blue! You've pawed and you've stared, but I excuse that as ignorance of what you did. Don't provoke me further!"

He laughed! His eyes dropped—but only as far as her bosom. "I've seen Lunatic women from a distance—I ferried supplies up from here for a year. But I always thought the old accounts exaggerated. I used to dream about catching a real woman, sometime. Come here—maybe the books didn't exaggerate the rest of it, either!"

"Filth!" The little electrogun came out with a whipping motion, but he was quicker. He plucked it out of her hand, examined it, and pocketed it quietly. Lara jerked forward, and her teeth were raging for his neck.

He caught her, lifted her against all her fury. Then, before she could realize his intentions, her face was yanked around and his came down, forcing his lips against hers. And again, the shocking sensations sucked the energy from her body, until she could only stand frozen and white-faced until it was over.

HIS BLUE-SKINNED face crinkled into a grin. "Pleasant enough, but the ancient books exaggerated. Stand still! And this time, cooperate, or I'll squeeze your throat until your head pops off like a pit from a plum. You know how—you've books enough. At least, you've all you could find, leaving none for your blue slaves, as you thought. But things change in two centuries; cooperate, damn you!"

Lara shivered with rage, but the Blue obviously wasn't exaggerating—and she would do no good as a dead Master. Somehow, she caught control of her mind. His words gave her some clue—there'd been times when she had had her own romantic dreams of what the past had been like. And she'd had a few scraps of film. Now she summoned what skill she could, trying to relax and be soft against him, until his guard dropped.

But the sheer savage force he put into it was more than she had expected. She was gasping, uncertain, when he released her.

"It improves. But it can wait. What were you doing here?" He saw her gesture, and shook his head. "I'm not a slave, Lunatic! I'm one of the dead, according to your records. That's why I hide myself and my laboratories here—along with the books. I'm not in awe of you, but I know enough not to let you escape. I'm trading you a little life for common sense. Why were you going into my laboratories? As a spy?"

He had thrown the door the crack was supposed to conceal back now, and was dragging her after him, into a huge cavern, filled with the wrecks of great generators and a surprising collection of the tools of physics. Her eyes leaped unconsciously toward the camouflaged controls of the Attractor, spotted them, and went back to the laboratory. A Blue who did not respect the Masters! One who had read and studied—and now one who was doing science, the great forbidden act for the Blues!

"Then the rumors—" She couldn't finish it; it was starkly incredible. The Blues couldn't revolt. They were born to be slaves, reared as such, and knew no other fate. Besides, they had no weapons—or should have had none. This laboratory and the yellow nimbus about him left her less certain.

"War," he admitted calmly. "We have a debt to settle. Tomorrow night, we take the first steps. We've labored down here too long in want, to maintain a few of you in luxury on the moon. Now it's over. By the way, my name is Bruce; and since you're my woman by ancient right of conquest, what's yours?"

She told him, recognizing that there was no resisting his strength. "I could give you freedom, luxury—a woman Blue—as many as you want!"

He grimaced. "I've seen them. Fat, soft breeding animals you keep on the moon to maintain your stock. I revolted because I was to be a male

breeder! After the mutation your war bred in my people, you had a hard time keeping it pure, didn't you? And it's only transmitted through the female. Too bad those females were unable fully to calcify their bones, and were imbeciles without exception. But don't expect me to increase your slaves! I ...come here!"

"What—what—?" Anything to change the subject, to sway his mind, to give her time to think! "And didn't my people suffer? You had breeding females saved for you by our kindness—while we almost lost out last men!"

"Yeah. I've seen those, too. You should have put them to work instead of letting them turn into such fragile little things. The histories of a place called France had 'dandies' in them that made your men look like lisping weaklings. Now be still; I've got to get out and direct things in another hour."



He reached for her again, and she shrank back. "What do you intend—want...?"

He told her, and his reason for the advisability of cooperation left no room for argument. And finally, as she met his eyes, she could feel tears on her own. Surprisingly, his own look softened, and the arms that drew her to him were strangely gentle. But he shook his head.

"You can't really believe what a slave thinks—I don't believe it myself. Do you think I want a stupid war of vengeance? I'm not a fool. But if I take you out there, they'll do things you couldn't imagine. I can't let you go back to report to the Lunatics. And somehow, you might get free if I leave you—unless I know you'll never dare go back. This way, you won't. They'd hear—

I'd see to that—and you'd wish our rebels had done their worst. Patriotic pride in purity!"

He hesitated, and finally laughed again, grimly. "Tyrants on the moon, pig-men turning to blood-crazed jackals on earth. I wanted to be a student once, like those of old. Maybe you had dreams. But now we're what our worlds have made us. Cry if you want to."

SHE DIDN'T cry, then; but when he finally left, fastening the door behind him, she was crying. There was no rage in her now, nor even the drive to escape. There was no place to escape. In that, he'd been only too correct; she wasn't of the Moon now, and she could never be a Blue. She tried to whip her body into fury, but it was as limp as her mind.

From a small shaft above, the cries and rallying sounds of a mob came down, and she realized it must comprise all the Blues on earth. But the war against her pitifully few people seemed eons away. It wouldn't matter, anyhow. The moon was safe; it had always been inviolate, impregnable. Who owned the moon owned earth.

It had been that way when the first space-ship crawled up to it and established a base. It had proven so when a rival nation had struck at it, and the radioactives from the moon had wiped out most of the earth and brought the mutation of Blueness. Did it matter if nearly all the men on Luna had died as well, so that the women had to take over?

They had done well enough in two centuries, too; they'd found the shield against gravity, and learned to use it to create gravity. Moon surface now was at normal earth gravity, while a few miles up, the encircling shield cut off all gravity from earth, to enable them to approach within a distance easy for space-ferrying. In the early days the moon would have broken up from gravitational pulls at five times that distance; now, held by the bare thread of the Attractor field that was artificially maintained

between the two bodies, it circled slowly in a small orbit, still ruling the earth below it. The moon would always rule.

In the darkness, something small and furry scurried along the wall, and she shrieked, drawing back into a corner. The strength came back to her legs, and she made the laboratory table in a great leap, curling up against the wall, and into a cubbyhole of sorts that was there. The animal had gone. She waited for another, but it did not seem there were more, since none appeared. The one had been as frightened as she was.

Then the lethargy that had replaced all her other emotions began to assert itself. The cries of the Blues above faded away, and the thin shaft of light dimmed. She huddled back into the cubbyhole and let the sleep she had never expected wash over her.

It was a scurry of little feet that awakened her. The animal had come back—with all its friends. Something sharp dashed its clawy feet across her legs!

From somewhere, a hand fell over her mouth, and an arm lifted her quivering, leaping body back against the wall. "Shut up, you fool! If any of the men hear you... They're only rats, scared by my coming back. Hush! Do you have to behave as the old books said women did? You're safe."

He started to shake free, but she clung to him, digging her face into his shoulder, trying to cover all of her body with his. He shook her free, grinning again, and pointed to food he'd brought. "Eat it. If you knew the risk I'm running in sneaking back here when the men are getting the ships ready, you'd know it isn't to be wasted."

"Ships?"

"Of course. For every ship that was ruined between here and Luna, two were faked. We've been accumulating them for three generations. And we've finally found the shield we wanted against your radiation weapons—this yellow glow you see. My father began it, I finished it. Here, eat the rest of it."

IT SHOOK her. But there was still the great anti-gravity outer shield. It could be hardened down until nothing could get through, except the Attractor field. And there was another thing that could be done.

He swept the crumbs into the cloth and stuck it into a pouch at his side. "You can climb the shaft, if you want, up to a little opening. You can see the despised Blues taking off after your precious Lunatics. And since it's too late for you to warn Luna—if you were fool enough to try—I won't lock you in."

The door was barely closing behind him when the scurrying came again. He leaped back, slamming it shut and grabbing for her, to cut off her cry. But the scream died as she buried her head against his breast. "They—they—Bruce, stay here!"

"Because of a few rats, half-tame ones." He pulled her face up, started to turn away, and then swung back. The grin was crooked on his face, and his arms were tautening slowly. "Well, why not? For a time."

She broke free long enough to use a word she hadn't known she knew. He made no answer, but his face twisted, and she knew suddenly that he hated himself as thoroughly as she could hate him—or herself—hated the wrongness with all this outward fulfillment of his boyhood dreams of what might have been long ago. For a moment she clung tighter to him, shaking her head, sharing the hatred. There was a rat in a shaft of light, watching her. It no longer mattered. Behind Bruce, her hand found a crumbled bit of rock, and threw it. The rat scampered away, and she found his lips again.

There was no shock now in the caress. She was no longer of Luna, and whatever happened here on this subject world to give her even a moment's forgetfulness was welcome.

But memories came back, after he had gone, along with the too-long neglected job she had come to do. She found the Attractor, and culled the needed facts from her mental pictures, setting back the force of it

In its false-front of generator controls. They had sent her down to correct a sudden, unexplainable shift of the moon two percent closer to earth. Now let them wonder why the planet moved out to twice its former distance—out where the salvaged ships of the Blues could never reach it, with the size of their fuel tanks. It was her last gesture toward the world that had been ripped from her with a grin and a savage hand.

Then she climbed slowly up the shaft, still vague in her movements and without purpose in her mind. Sometime, she promised herself, she'd find a knife to use on his back; but he was still too watchful. Then she could kill herself. But she'd think of that some other time. She worked her way up, to find a tiny ledge just under the small opening. Beyond, she could see three ships being moved out into a cleared space, while another took off. But the moon was invisible, hidden by part of the building. A bit of the sky showed, however, totally wrong.

"Halloo!" The call came from below, and she looked down, upsetting a bit of rubble. "Halloo, Bruce. Time to—Hey! Hey! Men! A Lunatic—a White!"

The man began climbing up the shaft, but Lara wasted no time. The broken rock around the opening to the outside crumbled in her fingers, and went spinning down against the climber. She shoved her shoulders through the opening, found it wide enough, and was out—squarely in front of a heavy, muscular Blue.

Chaos broke out then. She was darting, running, leaping in and out, barely missing hands that kept coming closer. And the cry rose higher behind her. Suddenly, her arm was grabbed in a crushing fist, and she went spinning around, to be thrown over a yellow-glowing Blue's shoulder.

"Shut up! Lie still!" Bruce's voice hit her ears, jerking her head down to see it was he who had caught her. "You fool. Maybe they'll think I've captured you for a second."

But they were already breaking

away from the others. Then the cry came up from behind, the man who'd first seen her calling his news to the others. Bruce added a bit more to his speed, but her weight told against him.

His breathing was heavy, but he gasped out a few words. "Book about apemen when kids—used to play—hang on, if timber's still there. Hang on!"

THEY WERE falling through emptiness, down a huge, deep shaft as the words came out. She screamed, and heard his own voice echo it, just as his arms caught something, threatening to tear her from his shoulders by the shock. He groaned, then wiggled onto his stomach, and wormed rapidly under an overhang. Above, voices called down, and a light flashed on, showing muddy water at the bottom.

"Safe," he finally told her. "They think we're down there, dead. Safe, at least until we have to show ourselves to get tools, or the war kills us all. We can crawl through here, into another tunnel, follow that about three miles, and be outside the old city. I used to have a cave on a hill there, when I was eight, before they put me on full-time work to satisfy your people. Damn the Lunatics. They could have come down after the war and bred with us; there could have been a start toward a new race—we have some rather nice inherited abilities, such as triple reaction time. Instead, they had to play Ruler and Slave, and breed both true. Ouch, watch that place—broken glass."

"Why'd you save me?" she asked later. "You're an outcast now, too—aren't you?"

"Instinct. Not because I wanted to. Pure instinct to save a mate, whatever you think of her. Same drive that's half responsible for the Blue's hatred of Luna, and the Lunatics' cold-blooded fanaticism today. Repressed instincts. Men don't breed like cattle. Less than five hundred Blues here. How many on Luna?"

"Blues—thirty-five women. Maybe two hundred of—of the others. Bruce, how much further?"

"Fifteen yards, and we can walk."

They went on silently then. And finally they came out to a broken road among trees that wandered up a hill. They were in a clearing near the top, and Bruce went into a tiny cave, coming out with an old velvoplast robe and airmattress that he threw on a rock. She had slumped against it, and he had to lift her up and turn her head to the sky. She was tired, emotionally spent, and she sank back against him almost gratefully.

The sky was red.

She studied it, making no sense of it. The moon was glowing with a brilliant red that seemed to set the whole sky afire—and it was nearer—nearer than it had ever been. It should have been further away.

"Heterodyned," he said. "They found your gravity-shield frequency, and they've set up a counter force. It's heating up, it seems. I knew they had it, but didn't know it would work."

"But—" Then she understood. They must have been trying it out for weeks. It couldn't cut through the gravity shield until it broke it completely, of course. But it was wasting some of its energy in Attractor force, channeling itself to a frequency that stepped up the little force applied, and bringing the moon in closer.

SOMETHING nagged at her, but she shook it off. She was an outcast—what difference did it make? And the change was still unreal, after the fixed orbits of her whole life. She bent her head up toward the sky, and he kissed her. She made no attempt to draw away, even tried responding. It was pleasant, in a way, if she didn't think about it.

"All the men from here are up there—we're all there's left on earth," he told her. "Be quite a spectacle when the shield cracks. The moon will get down within two hundred miles of earth, at her velocity! And then the Blues will have their fill of blood and revenge, I suppose!"

The nagging thought hit her. "Roche's limit!"

"Huh?"

"Roche's limit. At that range, it's going to crack up, like Saturn's rings—even if it doesn't draw nearer, it's within less than a fifth of the distance it would have to be to stand. Bruce! Bruce, we've got to go back."

He shook his head. "Let it crack. All the moon ever brought was lunacy. It used to be in every superstition as the source of insanity. And it turned out to be the biggest insanity of all. To hell with it!"

"It'll take us with it! Bruce, it can be stopped. That's what I came for—to change the real attraction that holds us; it isn't gravity any more—the shield is perfect, as long as it stands. Your people, the others, Earth itself..."

"Does it matter?" he asked, and his grin was back, twisted more than ever. "Maybe it does. Maybe earth does, at least. It wasn't her fault we went wrong. All right, lead on; we can make it in an hour, if we hurry."

The moon was sinking lower as they went, and her legs were leaden. Somewhere, he found a horse, and put her on it, leading the animal, but they made slow time. He dashed into another building at the edge of the tall buildings and came back with dark bread and thick molasses dripping from it, handing it to her while he swallowed what she left. He was right—they needed nourishment badly.

But at last they reached the laboratory, and he shoved back the half-opened door. The moon was brighter now, so lurid that no light was needed as she found her way by the illumination from the shaft, and began playing with the difficult dials of the deceptive panel.

She dragged him out, up the ladders that led through various levels. And finally he looked up, and his grunt was the first really surprised sound she had heard.

The moon was moving outward, picking up speed as it went at a seemingly impossible rate, and shrinking almost visibly. Its color had dropped a fraction, also.

"The Attractor can also repulse,

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if reversed—and it has full power now—plus the waste energy from the shield, which will take form in negative Attraction as well as positive. I'm a field expert—or was. Maybe they'll be able to get a ship down and anchor on Mars, since it's heading for that orbit. Mars will have three moons and we'll have none, then."

He nodded. "Unless they kill each other off. If they don't, let them learn to breed like humans—and feed themselves on their hydroponics. Well, there goes the next to the last lunacy."

She looked at him, trying to make sense of his final words, but he only grinned at her. His arms came out, picking her up and setting her on the horse. "We'll go back near the cave—there's an old house there, still sturdy. We can sleep in the cave tonight, start rebuilding tomorrow. Or you can take the horse and go where you like. But you'll probably starve to death without me to show you how to live. That's the last lunacy, Lara—the two of us,

this whole business between us. It's over, too."

But he kept his hand on the horse's neck, guiding it.

She studied the hand, blue in color, but strong and lithe, sure of itself, sometimes cruel in its mockery, but equally gentle when it should be. The color, along with defects in the females, was passed on by the female Blues only. Their children would be the old color of men before the mutation. But they'd need hands like that in the world which was left for them to repopulate.

"Let's hurry back to the cave—beloved," she said. The last word came hard, from the rusty files of history. But time would remedy that.

He reached up, lifted her down onto his shoulder, and then into his arms. His legs were steady and unfaltering as he marched forward with her toward the cave.

Neither looked up for the receding moon.

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

Of Future Combined With Science Fiction Stories, published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1, 1950.

State of New York) ss.
County of New York)

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Future Combined With Science Fiction Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Managing editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1950. Maurice Coyne (My commission expires March 30, 1952.) (SEAL)

The Lithium Mountain

by Noel Loomis

(author of "Parking Unlimited")

Deep in Joe Talbott's mind was the surety that a fatal mistake had been made . . . just a slight error; but in the Lithium Mountain, the first mistake was the last!

THE BRYD was beginning to worry. It might even have to awaken, because Joe Talbott's mind was no longer the cozy, restful place it had been, where the Bryd could curl up and snooze for half a century or so.

The Bryd, in fact, was becoming apprehensive, for it—now approaching middle age of its billion or so years of life-expectancy—found itself less inclined to change minds than it had been when it had left its home on the eighth planet of Arc-turus and hitch-hiked on a runaway comet to Pluto some millions of years before.

The Bryd wondered if it wasn't getting old, because it felt no desire ever to leave the planet Earth with its millions of friendly minds. After those long, lonesome eons in the absolute zero of Pluto with not another living entity anywhere within contact radius, the Bryd was pretty well cured of wanderlust.

It liked Earth so well that it had gone back in time from 2250, the year of its arrival on Earth, to 1950, so it could keep an eye on man while he experimented with lithium and hydrogen for atomic power. For the Bryd, some four hundred million years before, had had to leave Arc-turus VIII because somebody had gotten reckless with LiH and split the planet wide open; it didn't care to have earth kicked out from under its feet and to be left again in empty space.

Earth was a very hospitable place, and, barring mishap, the Bryd thought that for the rest of its natural life it would live in nice,

cozy minds where there would be friendliness and companionship and warmth.

It hoped for some sleep, too, but here it had been in Joe Talbott's mind only two or three years and Joe's mind was so disturbed that it had almost awakened the Bryd. It hoped Joe would settle down. If he didn't, the Bryd might even have to move. It began to probe Joe's mind, and very soon it was definitely concerned.

Joe was evading the head physician at the Lithium Mountain, where Joe was supposed to go to work to-night. Joe had just run down an alley and ducked into a bakery truck, and certainly if the physician should see him now, with his head wedged in between loaves of freshly baked bread, and his foot stuck through an angel-food cake, he would have Joe put through the tests before he would ever certify Joe for the night shift.

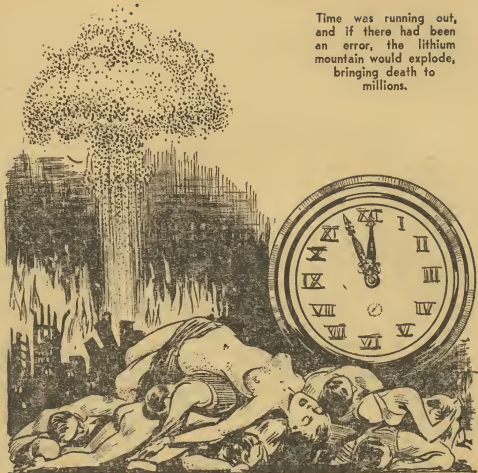
And that was the very thing Joe was trying to avoid, because Joe wanted to go to work that night, and he was afraid that if he had to take the tests he wouldn't pass.

For Joe knew he was going crazy from the awful mental pressure of the Mountain.

THE BRYD paused to consider that. Then he went deeper and got the whole picture. Joe's dad had been one of the first employees in the Mountain, and he, like about half of all those who went to the Mountain, had been released for "mental instability." That had worked on Joe's mind. At first he had belittled the idea and had main-

(illustrated by Luros)

Time was running out,
and if there had been
an error, the lithium
mountain would explode,
bringing death to
millions.



tained that his father was only eccentric; and, as soon as he could qualify, he himself took a job in the Mountain to prove it.

But now—well, after nearly three years in the Mountain, Joe's fear of the awful power of the Mountain had suddenly overwhelmed him. Just why, he didn't know. He seemed to just *feel* that the Mountain was getting ready to blow up. There didn't seem to be any logical reason for such a fear, so Joe kept it to himself and tried to keep it down, but now it was almost too much; the only logical answer Joe could figure was that there was a mental weakness in the family, that the old man had indeed been wacky, and that Joe was following in his steps.

The bread-wagon stopped, and Joe got out, threw a five-dollar bill at the driver, and ran. He felt sure the doctor was hunting him, and he wasn't taking a chance. He shot down the cross-street that led to the *Tribune* office, where his father had been the Monotype operator since he had left the Mountain.

Joe went up the broad marble steps of the *Tribune* building, two at a time. He stumbled at the top and looked around guiltily, but nobody had seen him.

This was getting serious. The Bryd didn't like it; Joe had better get straightened out in a hurry. He was due at his post on the Penetrativity Board at five o'clock. But the Bryd wondered if Joe should try to

work tonight. In his state of turmoil it would be easy to make some small error of commission or omission that would result in the instantaneous fission of one hundred and eighty million tons of lithium and hydrogen. That much LiH mixture would produce roughly four times ten to the thirty-sixth ergs of energy. It would be like setting the sun down on Power City, for thirteen seconds. It was not inconceivable that it would vaporize the earth.

The only thing was, if Joe didn't go to work, they would investigate, and they'd probably bar him for the same reason as they had barred his dad. The Bryd sighed; it was a rugged circle—and Joe with only two months to go before he could be retired.

Joe rode to the fifth floor on the elevator and went into the Monotype room.

"Hello, dad. Thought I'd drop in on the way to work." He tried to seem casual. "Everything all right?"

Mr. Talbott was a small, black-haired man. He stooped a little, and his eyes looked up from his face. He shook his head nervously. "No worse than usual. No worse than usual." His hands darted out and he lifted a bunch of column-length slugs and carried them over to a storage rack. His steps, the Bryd noted, were short and jerky. The Bryd didn't see anything wrong with Mr. Talbott, but maybe he was still pretty much asleep, because the distress grew fast in Joe's mind.

THERE WERE five Monotypes in the little room. Three of them were running. The strip-machine, casting slugs, was going thump-thump-thump, and the slug came out in three-quarter-inch jerks; whenever it got to be two feet long it was automatically cut off. There was a giant-caster making spacing material, and it went slower and with a much harder bump...bump...bump. And there was a sorts-caster making some capital A's that ran with a click-click-click; capital A's popped out like magic.

The Bryd yawned—mentally, that

is, for of course the Bryd was nothing but pure energy—and almost smiled to itself. These humans were so unalterably clumsy and inefficient. With the proper use of nucleonic thermocision they could make an infinity of capital A's in less than zero time. But certainly no one could deny that humans did make cute machines. That one with the capital A's popping out of it, going clickity-click so busily—

Mr. Talbott hung a pig of casting-metal above the pot of the strip-caster. Joe was standing close. The Bryd could almost smell the burning gas and feel the heat from the pot. Then Mr. Talbott looked down at the strip-caster and suddenly swore. The Bryd saw that something had happened; the strip-caster was still running, but at the moment there wasn't any slug coming out of the mold.

Now the Bryd felt Joe's concern become intense. Mr. Talbott cut off the machine and turned up the heat.

Then there was a strange noise at the left. From the sorts-caster, with the capital A's popping out, there was a hard thump and then a short hissing noise and the machine stopped. Mr. Talbott's eyes darted wildly. He swore again, solidly now and uselessly, but steadily.

"A squirt!" he blurted. "A squirt. That's the second one tonight." Joe tried to murmur calming words, but Mr. Talbott didn't listen. He got a screwdriver and began to pry at the metal plastered over the machine, but in a moment he went back to the strip-caster and started it again. Then he said to Joe, with an air of exhaustion, "I've got to go outside for some fresh air. Let's have a smoke."

Joe's mind was seething, and the Bryd began to really worry. He couldn't see anything wrong with Joe's dad; the big trouble was with Joe himself.

"Listen, dad," said Joe, "why don't you take a vacation? Run down to Aconcagua for a few months."

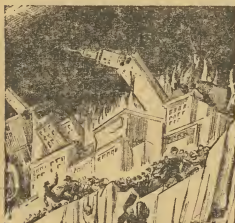
Now the Bryd was surprised. It took a quick look into Joe's mind and was almost shocked at what it

found. Joe felt sure that he was going nuts, and he wanted his dad out of the way so he wouldn't have to see it.

"It's getting you, dad," Joe agreed.

"It's enough to get anybody." Mr. Talbott stopped at the water-fountain. "All that mountain of lithium and hydrogen out there just under critical mass, day and night. Man isn't strong enough to control a million degrees of heat. If it ever gets loose for an instant it will destroy the North American continent. No wonder you're nervous."

"Who's nervous?" demanded Joe.



Cities would go up in flames.

THE BRYD was wide awake now. It didn't like the sound of Joe's voice, like a ragged edge of thin steel vibrating under high tension. Well, the Bryd could take over his mind, perhaps, and straighten Joe out, but the Bryd was very much an entity to mind its own business. It didn't like to interfere with humans; it just wanted to lie in a nice, cozy mind and bask in the warmth of friendliness and companionship.

There wasn't much of that any more in Joe's mind, and the Bryd didn't quite understand it. He recalled the circumstances of his going back in 1950. He had known that man was going to build the pile of LiH to be known as the Mountain, and ignite it by plutonium fission in 1958, to supply power for the continent to the extent of some fifty quadrillion B. T. U.'s annually. The

only catch was: they would have to disintegrate the mass at such a rate that any given quantity would last nine hundred thousand years. That was the breaking-point. At a lower temperature the costs rose sharply. At a much higher temperature it could not be controlled.

So the Bryd had thought it should be on hand, just to see that nobody made a mistake; it went back and picked Joe's mind as perfectly integrated and stable, and slipped in for a stay. Using Joe's mind as a base, it tried to keep an eye on everything that went on at the Mountain, but Joe's mind was so comfortable that sometimes the Bryd dozed off when it didn't mean to, while men went ahead and started off the Mountain.

One gram of lithium and hydrogen would produce 2.2×10^{13} ergs of energy, therefore the hundred and eighty million tons in the Mountain would make four times 10^{23} ergs—some four undecillion, the clumsy way humans figured, or, in horsepower, three hundred septillion. That was quite a chunk of energy to be produced all at once—in the flash of a millionth of a second, say. Of course the Bryd probably could get away from Earth ahead of it, but what about the men?

And what about Joe? Why was Joe like this, anyway? Had the Bryd overlooked something, and had its entrance into Joe's mind upset Joe's integration? That made the Bryd very uncomfortable. Obviously it couldn't pull out now; if this situation was its fault, it would have to stay and see it through. And it must be its fault, for the Bryd didn't like to admit that it had been wrong about Joe's original stability.

Joe started down the hall. Mr. Talbott went back to the Monotype room and suddenly began to swear violently. The strip-caster had gone wild. Mr. Talbott had thrown the cut-off, and the caster had been making a single continuous strip ever since they had left the room. It had gone into the corner of the room and then began to double up as it became longer. It must have made

a loop that reached clear across the room and then started back as the caster kept pumping out metal. Now the Monotype room was filled with a wild maze of lead-colored metal ribbon. It seemed like hundreds of feet, and the caster was still pumping away. The capital A's on the sorts-caster were dropping steadily to the floor as they were pushed on by new ones popping out of the mold.

Mr. Talbott went squirming into the maze like a stray neutron working its way through the interlaced orbits of a uranium atom. Joe started after him, but Mr. Talbott came back, his head shaking. The distress grew in Joe's mind. The Bryd looked into Mr. Talbott's mind and saw that he was disgusted, but nothing more.

It went back and worked a little on the higher centers of Joe's mind and touched one lobe with a temporary anesthesia. Joe reacted at once. He patted his father gently on the back and turned and left. There wasn't time for monkey-business. The Bryd had to figure this out, but Joe had to get to work. His four-hour shift was about due.

JOE CAUGHT a bus to the Mountain. The Mountain was a couple of miles from Power City, but it wasn't really a mountain. It was a huge glass and steel building as big as a young mountain, and everywhere in its hundreds of terraced stories it glowed with lights.

As soon as they got inside, the Bryd relaxed its hold on Joe's mind so Joe wouldn't flunk the daily psych test. The nurses made the routine physical examination, and at the last minute the Bryd had to hold down Joe's blood pressure, because it was over the limit. They took it three more times, but the Bryd watched it every time and they finally concluded the first time had been a freak.

But the white-coated doctor asked some sharp questions; "How do you determine the disintegration rate?"

"By the temperature of the mixture, the atomic numbers of the par-

ticipating elements, and their densities," said Joe automatically.

The doctor was checking a stopwatch. "What principles do you use?"

"Maxwell's distribution law and Gamow's formula for penetrativity."

But the doctor was suspicious, for now suddenly came a sharp question: "Can you give the formula for the rate of disintegration?"

Joe sat up sharply. "Why, yes, I think so."

The Bryd moved back. It took a quick look at the doctor's mind and saw the doctor was on the verge of checking Joe out of the Mountain. The Bryd didn't like that. For a moment it thought of helping Joe; but then it realized that if it should help Joe to recite the formula, it might only have to help him still more further on. So it decided to let Joe's mind go free. After all, if Joe could recite those pages of mathematical symbols from his own memory, that would be assurance to the Bryd that Joe's mind was a good place to stay.

Joe didn't go too fast, but he went right along, and in the end the doctor had to certify him for the shift. The Bryd was glad. But the Bryd was puzzled, too; now that Joe was all nicely certified and everything, Joe was worrying more than ever over whether he should go ahead and work tonight. The Bryd was beginning to lose patience, but then the anesthesia began to wear off Joe's mind and he remembered his father, and the Bryd was almost frightened at the grimness in Joe's mind.

Joe changed to his uniform and shoes. They were chemically, electrically, magnetically, and calorically neutral. He started down the mile-long corridor. His shoes made no sound. Others were in the corridor. They did not speak to each other. They were holding themselves tightly checked, for every step was bringing them nearer to the awful leashed power of the Mountain. It didn't help to know that they would be in as much danger a hundred miles away as they were here in the Mountain itself. The long walk was a test they had to face every day.

One poor devil lost control about half way. He screamed and started running. Instantly six guards stepped out into the corridor ahead of him with a net. They tangled him up and carried him away.

They all pictured devastation.



JOE JUMPED when the man first shouted, but after that he went on steadily. Joe looked all right from the outside, the Bryd knew, but the Bryd didn't like the way Joe was bottling things up inside. It didn't think Joe would last very long, the way he was going.

Joe reached the Penetrativity Board in the Disintegration Division of the Temperature Control Section. Joe's particular responsibility for the next four hours would be the fourteenth lobe in the thirty-second gallery of the ninth level of the mountain. The Board was a great room of soft green enamel and steel and crystal clear lucite, with a ceiling one hundred feet high. In the very center of the big room was a desk on a raised platform. That was psychological, the Bryd knew, an attempt to offset the mental pressure from sitting physically on top of the Mountain and one million degrees of heat. A man sitting at that desk got a feeling of bigness, of omnipotence—and man needed that feeling when he was dealing with the Mountain.

"Bill," said Joe.

The other man said simply "Joe," in a half-whisper.

Bill got up. Joe sat down. It was strange how lightly they stepped and how carefully they moved, as if they feared that too sudden a movement or too heavy a step would jar the Mountain into an explosion.

Joe looked over the board with its softly glowing indicator lights and its many moving graphs. He frowned when he noted the penetrativity rate in the fourteenth lobe. "That's high," he said.

"Yes," Bill said, "it's high, but Control has asked for seventy quintillion ergs additional per hour for the next twenty-four hours. The chief decided to take it all out of our gallery instead of spreading it over the entire sixteen thousand lobes. It's much more economical than it would be to raise the entire mass. And we have to watch expense, you know."

"Yeah," Joe growled, almost in defiance of the Mountain. "That's the way it goes. Ten years ago the same amount of power would have cost one hundred times what it's costing now, but they gripe just the same."

Bill looked at him narrowly, suspiciously. The Bryd sighed and took care of Bill's mind. My, how complicated things were getting.

"It's quicker this way, too," Bill went on. "It would take several days to raise the entire Mountain. Only thing—it's touchy; you have to watch it. I guess the big chief figures he can depend on the thirty-second gallery, all right," he said proudly.

"Yes," Joe said tightly, trying to eliminate from his mind everything but the Mountain, and not succeeding too well. "You're getting a hit for every sixty thousand penetrations. That's maintaining the heat considerably above one million."

"Yes."

"I still think," Joe said stubbornly, "that the people don't use much sense. Ten years ago they paid three cents a kilowatt-hour. Now they get over a hundred kilowatts for three cents, and still they put the pressure on Control to cut the cost—cut

the cost. Sure, that extra twenty per cent of power this way costs about sixty dollars per lobe, and if they spread it over the whole Mountain it would probably cost ten times that altogether—but the cost per kilowatt hour over the year would be a fraction of a mill—and it would be a lot safer."

THE BRYD was almost frantic as it clamped down on Bill's mind to make him forget this outburst so he wouldn't report it. The Bryd was pretty disgusted with Joe.

"The heat would be more," said Bill, "if it were not partially absorbed by the surrounding lobes."

"Yes, but it's dangerous. Fifty thousand is critical penetration for this lobe," Joe said irritably. But he signed Bill's book and went back to watching the dials. He didn't like that penetrativity rate. He *felt* wrong about it. He thought when he finished the shift he'd ask Integration to run up the formula again for critical penetrativity in the fourteenth. He'd do it now, only they probably wouldn't finish before his shift was over. All the technicians had been jumpy lately, and Integration had been loaded with more problems than even their eighty-thousand-tube analyzer could handle.

He looked at the dial again. The rate was still dropping. The red line was down to 59,987.2. Not much, but significant. There was a lot to go before he started damping. He didn't want to damp too soon. After all, the Mountain was expected to be economical. That was the only way the chief justified salaries of four and five thousand a month for technicians.

Then Joe got hold of himself. He'd quit worrying until the number of protons required for a hit was down to fifty-five thousand.

The Bryd was pleased now. It prepared to curl up in Joe's mind and relax for a while. But it got to thinking about that danger point. Was fifty thousand too close?

The Bryd shook itself. Was it getting jumpy, too? My goodness, what—now, wait a minute. How about that formula, anyway? Maybe

it wouldn't hurt to run over it quickly, just to check.

The Bryd left Joe's mind for a moment and looked up the records. That day they had added twenty thousand grams of lithium and three thousand grams of hydrogen to the charge in the fourteenth lobe. The Bryd added that to the previous additions, but then it got worried and went back to the beginning. The lobe had started originally with nine hundred and sixty million grams of lithium and one hundred and forty million grams of hydrogen, and had been maintained at such and such a heat for so many hours: so many more grams had been added next day, and so on and so on, through all the charges and all the exact minutes of temperature through all the years the Mountain had been in operation. One did not dare make a mistake. One gram over or above, one extra degree of heat, back years ago, would throw the calculations off, for there was of course no possible way of weighing the material still in the lobe without letting it cool, and that would take years and cost millions. So the Bryd checked everything.

And finally, after two hours of differential calculations that would have made the best efforts of the Mountain's huge analyzer look childish, the Bryd arrived at the startling fact that somewhere in the past two years some one *had* made a mistake, that as of this moment the critical penetrativity of the lobe was 54,932, that one single extra hit for each of that many protons would blow the Mountain to the North Pole.

So that was what was eating on Joe—the subconscious knowledge that there had been a mistake. Maybe that had been bothering everybody around the Mountain.

THE BRYD moved. It wasted a precious infinitesimal instant looking at the chart. That showed 55,140, and Joe was frowning and toying with the damping switch. The dial was dropping fast. It dropped ten as the Bryd looked, and then it dropped ten more. The rate of col-

lision was going up fast. The Bryd jumped into Joe's mind again. It saw that Joe was still worrying about his father.

"Oh nuts," thought the Bryd. It looked at the chart and opened its eyes wide. The needle had dropped to 55,050, and while the Bryd looked it took a decline to 54,960. The Bryd rand back along the wires and took a quick look at the fourteenth lobe. It saw the lobe's energy was increasing by quanta, and it also saw that the next jump would be down to 54,870. "Oh, my goodness," the Bryd moaned. It would have to do something now or move to somebody else's brain. But hold on; it couldn't move now. It had come back originally to keep an eye on things and see that man didn't destroy himself, and if it hadn't dozed off it would have caught the error before. It couldn't quit now, just when the error had reached the danger-point.

Well, what to do? Should the Bryd tamper with the mass in the lobe, or should it alter the heat, or just what? It didn't like to interfere with humans. That was a principle it had always held firmly, but now—the Bryd was most uncomfortable.

It didn't like the idea of monkeying any more with Joe's mind. How about Mr. Talbott's? Well, maybe. If it could be done without too much interference. The Bryd decided to see what it could find out. It rather thought that if Mr. Talbott would agree to leave, that would take just enough pressure off of Joe's mind so that Joe would follow his hunch and start damping. To persuade Mr. Talbott to leave would be the easiest, and, more important, the most easily justified—because after all, no entity had a right to come to Earth and interfere with Earth-people and change the course of affairs. Maybe the Mountain was supposed to blow up. Well, the Bryd had only one answer for that. It would be damned inconvenient.

It went back to Power City to look up Mr. Talbott, and, to be on the safe side, it went back in time an hour. Of course it could have worked on Joe's mind and temporari-

ly have made Joe think his father was all right, but the Bryd didn't believe in deceit. Even though there was less than a quarter of a second left for Joe to decide to start damping, the Bryd stuck by its code. It wouldn't do anything deceitful.

It found Mr. Talbott an hour ago, still swearing. The Bryd started into Mr. Talbott's mind, but the strip-caster was still running, and by now there must have been fifteen hundred feet of continuous six-point strip coiled inside the room. The capital A's still were popping out of the sorts-caster and they had made quite a pile on the floor, while the giant-caster was going ker-thump, and it sounded as if it needed more metal in the pot.

SO THE Bryd darted into the Monotype room and took the shape of a man. It hung up a pig on the giant-caster and went over to strip-caster, crawling through the entanglement of metal that was approximately eighty per cent lead, six per cent tin, and fourteen per cent antimony, with point twelve per cent of arsenic. It was fascinating to watch that long strip come out of the machine as if it were endless and coil up and loop itself like a comet-worm.

But the Bryd became aware that the composing-room foreman was coming up to Mr. Talbott outside. The foreman said: You having trouble, Tom?"

"I guess so," said Mr. Talbott. He waved at the Monotype room without looking. "They won't run for me any more," he said plaintively. "They're mad at me."

The Bryd blinked, figuratively speaking. Mr. Talbott was getting that way too.

"Where did you get your helper?"

"I haven't got any helper."

"Who's hanging up pigs, then?"

Mr. Talbott stared at him. Then he got up and started into the Monotype room, dusting the seat of his pants. The Bryd was trapped. It jumped into the open corner opposite the fifth machine and changed itself into a Monotype and sat there very quietly, hoping not to be no-

ticed. The strip-caster was still making a slug.

The foreman frowned and blinked. "You've got a new machine. When did that come in?"

Mr. Talbott stared and said sadly, "Please don't tease me. I'm a sick man."

"All I know is what I see."

Mr. Talbott looked. The Bryd was uneasy under Mr. Talbott's queer scrutiny. "It isn't running," Mr. Talbott said helplessly.

The Bryd got busy. If it would make them feel any better for it to run, it would run. What to do? What to do? It found the beginning end of the slug made by the strip-caster. It snatched that up and fed it into its own mold. It turned on its light and its motor. It turned on the gas under the pot and melted the metal instantly. Then it started running backward, sucking in the strip as fast as the strip-caster was ejecting it. Now everybody would be happy. The Bryd felt very proud of itself.

But the foreman said, "You've got four machines going, anyway, Tom; that's against union rules. Better turn off the new one."

Mr. Talbott went dazedly to the new machine. He started to throw the switch, then he shrieked. "It's going backward! It's—it's taking metal in instead of kicking it out!" He crumpled on the floor in a heap. The foreman took a good look, rubbed his eyes, looked again, and crumpled up in a heap beside him.

Now the Bryd felt guilty. It *had* messed things up. The farther it went the worse things got. That was what came of interfering. It atomized and was nothing but a cloud of energy. Mr. Talbott looked out fearfully from under his hat at the place where the sixth Monotype had been. The foreman got up and walked drunkenly around the room, crawling over strip lead and falling down and getting up again.

FINALLY Mr. Talbott turned off the strip-caster. The foreman turned off the giant-caster, but they both looked dazed. "Did you see what I saw?" the foreman asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Talbott. "Did you see it, too?"

"I guess I did if you did."

The Bryd by now was becoming impatient. Were those two ninnies going to wander around like a couple of drunken sea-horses the rest of their lives? It didn't want to interfere, but—oh, to hell with it. The Bryd took a flying jump into their minds and erased some memories, and then, just to make it good, it made sure that Mr. Talbott had decided to retire and go to Lake Aconagua for a quiet vacation.

Well, now it had done it. Mr. Talbott took off his coat and hat and started breaking up the slug so he could move around through the room. The sorts-caster was still popping out capital A's. The Bryd was disgusted with itself for butting in, but now it hiked back to the Mountain and looked over Joe's shoulder. There was still an eighth of a second.

The Bryd carefully planted the knowledge of Mr. Talbott's decision to quit Power City in an appropriate corner of Joe's mind and moved aside to watch results. It was very pleased when Joe decided to play safe at 55,000 and snapped down the damping switch in time to stop the penetrativity rate-of-acceleration.

Now the Bryd could finish its snooze. Already Joe's mind was becoming warm and cozy and snuggly. The Bryd relaxed and began to spread out comfortably.

But then it remembered something that had to be done before it could go to sleep. With a mental groan it got up and went back to Power City and turned off the sorts-caster so the capital A's would quit popping out on the floor.

THE END



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Martian Homecoming

by Frank Belknap Long

(author of "The Miniature Menace")

Through the veils of illusion, and waves of terrible remorse, they set out to slay the deadly creatures . . .

JIM MALDEN sat with his back to the metal wall of the shack, staring out gloomily into the driven rain. He was huge and hairy-chested, and he sat now with the light of a swollen fire reddening his flesh.

His wife threw another log into the fire and turned with an angry shrug. "Stop brooding, Jim!" she complained. "We came to Mars of our own free will. There's nothing on Earth I miss! *Nothing, you hear?*"

"It's all right for you to talk!" Jim said. "It don't take so much to make a woman happy. A woman never takes to craving things the way a man does."

"What things?" Mary Malden flared. "We've got a roof over our heads, haven't we? When you broke your hand and had to quit the ring you never talked that way. No, sir! You were mighty grateful for a chance to start over on Mars!"

"What did we get?" Jim grumbled. "A roof over our heads, sure. A settler's grant of five grand. But what else?"

"You dare to ask me that?" Mary raged. "The best years of my life I've given you, Jim Malden. I've slaved and denied myself and gone without—"

"Let's not quarrel, Mary!" Jim said, wearily.

He stood up and ran trembling fingers over his calloused, misshapen right fist. He saw again the light-drenched stadium on Earth, his opponent sparring for an opening, the drifting faces of the crowd. He shut his eyes and the bright, splendid vision was gone.

The pinched, gray face of his wife stared at him out of the flick-

ering firelight, her pupils questioning. She was thirty-four, but she looked fifty. Her hair straggled; her cheeks were sallow, and her lips were a tight, thin line.

A sudden tenderness and gratefulness came upon Jim Malden. He went up to her and patted her gently on the shoulder. "You're all right, old girl!" he said. "Better get on with the supper now."

"You're a good man, Jim!" Mary said, her eyes suddenly moist. "A fine figure of a man. You've been a good husband to me."

"Forget it," Jim said.

"It's the emptiness, the loneliness," Mary said. "I feel it too, Jim—especially at night. We've a colony here; we're all together, warm and friendly like we'd be in a little country town on Earth. But there's a difference too!"

"Sure there is," Jim agreed. "The land isn't friendly; that's the big difference. It's just rock and sand, sand and more sand, blowing, drifting around. The canals are either dried up or filled with stagnant water. There's no good, clean moonlight or fresh running water."

Jim Malden forced a grin. "But there's nothing wrong with our neighbors, Mary. No man has a right to fret and complain when he's got a wife like you and good friends to stand by him. It's the folks who make a place, Mary."

"Listen!" Mary said.

OUTSIDE THE shack there arose a shrill clamor. Running footsteps pattered along the quay and a child's terrified scream drowned out the distant boom of a warning rocket.

(illustrated by Luros)



The woman walked slowly, like a somnabulist, to her doom.

Jim rushed to the wall and took down a gun. He looked at his wife, his face as grim as death. "You know what that is, Mary," he said. "Promise me you won't go outside."

"Jim, stay here with me!" Mary pleaded, her lips white. "You don't have to go. Not this time. You've risked your life more often than the others."

"You mustn't talk that way," Jim said; "I can't shirk my duty."

"But you'll be killed, Jim. This time the dreams will kill you. You've a right to think of me. Oh, can't you see? You've been eating your heart out for Earth, for the old life. Your mind's far away, back on Earth with the cheering crowds. You've been longing for the ring again the way a young man longs for a woman."

"Now Mary—"

"You'll be trapped, Jim! Trapped and killed! It's a sickness with you now and you can't fight it. The Martian beast will get inside your mind, and you'll see Earth again, you'll see the ring. You'll be sick and weak, but you won't know how sick."

"I've got to live with myself, Mary! I've got to do my share of the fighting!"

Jim took his wife firmly by the shoulder and drew her back into the warm room with its high-leaping fire. Avoiding her eyes, he walked quickly to the door and threw it open. He walked straight out into the darkness, his huge shoulders squared.

An icy wind lashed his face, tore at his clothes. Up from the dark canal drifted a shimmering cloud as sinister as the barren heart of midnight.

The Martian seemed all eyes. Vicious and furtive, it drifted straight past Jim and then drifted slowly back. Like a great, night-shadowed jellyfish it swirled along the stagnant tide, its eyes shifting about and lighting up its dark bulk.

Far down the village street a woman wailed in torment. She came slowly into view, tottering along the quay, moving like a somnambulist through the shadows. She wheeled

suddenly, her face a livid mask of terror.

"Wait!" Jim shouted. "Get back!"

The woman continued to move forward, her hands pressed to her throat. She leapt with a despairing scream into the canal.

Jim heard the splash, saw the Martian sweep forward to wrap itself about her.

White-lipped, Jim raised his gun to his shoulder. As he took careful aim two tall figures emerged from shadows to stand at his side.

Instantly a warm sense of comradeship in danger swept over Jim. The man at his right was lean and sallow, with a gaunt, weather-beaten face. Jim recognized him. Grant Trask, a gentle, scholarly man who had spent his best years teaching school on Earth.

"Careful with your aim, Jim!" Trask said. "It's sending out merciless cruel thoughts now—punishing thoughts. But soon it will be making us see the things we want most in life."

"That woman must have done something mighty horrible to throw herself into the canal at the first touch of its mind!" Jim muttered.

"Not so horrible, Jim. Just something human she's been trying all these years to hide from herself. Martians can make the pangs of guilt and remorse seem intolerable!"

The Martian was in motion again. It was coming closer, swirling up from the canal. Its eyes flashed, and shifted.

Jim blasted. Lightning forked from his gun, brightening the canal.

The Martian horror swirled back, quivered, and swept straight toward the three men like a devouring cloud. "Run for your life, Jim!" Trask shouted. "Run, run!"

Jim turned and ran along the quay. The quay was filling with frightened villagers swarming from their shacks. As another warning rocket boomed Jim halted abruptly, aware of a firm hand on his arm.

"It was a good try, Jim!" Trask said.

Jim stared. Far in the distance a dark cloud faintly flecked with

light was drifting desertward over the awakened village.

"We'll have to track it down now, Jim," Trask said. "It has the taste of people in its dark mind. It will come back and kill again."

GRANT TRASK knew more than Jim did about the Martians. His insatiable scholar's curiosity had taken him often to the towering ruins in the northeastern desert where a vanished humanoid race had built vast monuments beneath the stars.

Tremendous frescoes covered walls of crumbling stone, their pigments time-defying, gaudy with sun colors. Life on Mars had followed a strange evolutionary pattern. A primitive, amoebic form of intelligent life had survived the evolution of a humanoid race and the rich, exuberant growth of a humanoid culture.

The humanoids had been resourceful, creative, self-reliant; the amoebic life form parasitic and greedy. The amoebic life form, its powers of reproduction weakened by the slow drying up of the Martian deserts, had preyed on the humanoids in their great stone cities.

Ever more insatiably it had drained the vital energies of the big-brained bipeds who resembled men. The lure it used was a psychic prod, inhuman, unnatural. It could make a man see the fulfillment of all his dreams in a blaze of glory. For thousands of years the humanoids, alone and in groups, driven and fearful, aspiring and maddened, had walked forward into the illusionary blaze of that deeper richer life—to be consumed utterly.

Most of the amoeba forms had succumbed to exhaustion and drought, but a few had lingered on, surviving the dying of the humanoid culture, sleeping for long ages in the desert wastes.

Now Earthmen, coming in rockets from Earth, had awakened them from their long slumber, filled them with a devouring hunger which nothing but death could slake.

The second man who had stood with Jim on the quayside came up,

his face flushed with excitement. "No sense in making it a big party, Jim!" he said. "We'll take care of it—just the three of us!"

Dave Rawson was a big man with a shrewd, small, practical mind. When Martians threatened the village with their strange powers he was always in the forefront of the struggle.

Dave Rawson ran an inn. An innkeeper has to be popular and fearless; an innkeeper has to stand behind a wide bar with his sleeves rolled to his elbows—a jolly, fearless man.

But deep in his heart Dave Rawson was a blackguard. He cheated, lied and beat his wife; he liked to bully lesser colonists, the little men who came and went.

Jim stared into the man's deepset eyes and shrugged. "We'd better get started!" he said.

The three men walked down the street and out of the village. Until the houses dwindled, the children followed them, admiring their air of fearlessness. The women watched from doorways with shining eyes. Some of the men made earnest efforts to join the party, but Grant Trask had a quiet, sure way of making his will prevail.

"Next time, George. You've done more than your share of tracking!"

"Stay with your wife, Fred. She's ill and needs you."

BEYOND THE town the bleak Martian desert closed in like a flapping shroud. The wind howled and moaned, sending sandballs careening down steep slopes, filling the air with a continuous rustling.

Jim ploughed on with lowered head, dust stinging his nostrils, his gun jogging in the crook of his arm.

"I can't forget there were human beings on Mars once," Trask said. "Big-brained bipeds who walked erect. Builders and dreamers with brain pans as large as ours. They hurled a torch to us from a dead and buried past. They gave us the moral right to carry on the fight."

"We're men," Rawson grunted. "The Martians are crawling blobs

of slime. That's enough for me!"

"The Martians are as intelligent as we are," Trask said. "They can get inside our minds and make our secret thoughts real, three-dimensional. They can bring back Earth. They can offer men paradise, the forbidden fruit, the lost Eden. If men refuse to eat they can turn the human sense of guilt into a cruel, punishing reality. One way or another, all men, are vulnerable."

"Where do you think it went, Grant?" Jim asked.

"It will seek a deep hollow in the desert," Trask said: "It is sluggish now with death, fat like a grave worm with the life of that tortured woman."

Shadows leapt across the desert, purpled the rolling dunes. On the far horizon a cloud floated, assuming grotesque shapes.

Dawn was breaking over the desert when they found the Martian. It lay in a hundred foot hollow in the tumbled sand, sluggish with its feasting, its eighty eyes almost motionless in the chill light.

The three men descended into the hollow with their guns in readiness, their faces tight and strained. Trask was the calmest of the three. "Don't shoot until we're close," he warned. "We can't afford to miss this time."

Rawson said: "It's watching us! Its eyes—"

Rawson's speech congealed.

Rawson saw a light shine out from the beast. It was white and dazzling. The beast's eyes began to move, to shift about.

As Rawson stared the eyes melted and ran together and became a lake of fire.

"Dave, come back!" Trask shouted. "Dave, in the name of heaven—"

RAWSON WAS already running down into the hollow, his eyes bright with an eagerness such as he had never known. He tossed his gun aside, waved his arms. He ran faster.

Ahead of him the lake of fire brimmed with a rosy radiance. Out of it floated an immense translucent bubble. The bubble was not empty.

Within it a woman stirred and opened sleepy eyes.

The woman reclined at full length, her arms extended in voluptuous appeal. She had green cat's eyes, and a mass of tumbled golden hair that encircled her pale face like a garland. Rubies scintillated against her fair skin.

The bubble with its tantalizing burden floated toward Rawson, and the woman looked out at him, and desire rained hot coals on his blood.

He fell to his knees and reached up with both arms as the bubble descended.

"Dave, get up! Get to your feet, man! You're looking at nothing, you're staring into vacancy!"

The hands on Dave's arm and shoulder were like steel bands. The hands of Grant Trask.

Rawson swung about with a curse, his eyes red-rimmed. "It's a lie! You want that woman for yourself. Get away from me or I'll kill you!"

"No, Dave!" Trask pleaded. "It's an illusion; there's nothing there!"

Rawson struck Trask in the face. He gritted his teeth and pivoted away from Trask on his knees. He saw blood run from Trask's mouth over his chin.

He was glad that he had hurt Trask. He could see the bubble again and the woman was still extending her arms toward him.

He got to his feet and staggered forward, his throat parched.

Trask bent and picked up his gun. He followed Rawson patiently, anxiously. He did not think of himself, of his own safety. The savage blow which he had received meant nothing to him. Safe at home, in the village, he would have lain Rawson out cold.

But now Rawson was walking to his death, and had a claim on him. Friend or enemy; bully, sadist or coward—what did it matter? Rawson was a human being in deadly peril, a man in desperate need of help. Rawson shared with Trask a common humanity. They were both men, facing a threat that was alien to humanity.

JIM HAD seen the struggle and was advancing on the run, his gun raised. "Don't shoot, Jim!" Trask called. "He sees something we can't see! We've got to save him from himself!"

Jim nodded and lowered his gun. But he still ran on.

Trask caught up with Rawson fifty feet from the Martian. He seized his arm and jerked him about.

"Listen to me, Rawson" he pleaded. "You're following a mirage. The beast has got inside your mind!"

Rawson wrenched his arm free, his lips shaking. "That's a lie! She's beautiful and I'll hold her in my arms if I die for it! She's singing to me! Can't you hear her?"

"There's nothing but empty desert ahead of us, Dave."

"You want her for yourself. I warned you before. Now—"

Rawson lurched suddenly. He grabbed Trask's wrist and twisted it viciously.

Rawson wrenched the gun from Trask's hand and gave him a shove. As Trask went reeling backward Rawson raised the gun to his shoulder and took careful aim.

Rawson fired, putting bullet after bullet into Trask, spinning him about and hurling him to the ground.

The desert sand spurted up about Trask sinking down in a red welter. Horror and pity looked for an instant out of Trask's glazing eyes. He fell forward upon his face, twisted convulsively; he lay still.

White with rage, Rawson crouched low as the sunlight threw a filmy haze between his reeling senses and the dead man.

He saw Jim coming toward him through the glare, armed and furious.

"Stay back, Jim!" Rawson warned. "Don't come any closer."

"I'm going to kill you, Rawson!" Jim said. "You shot Trask down in cold blood. He was the best friend you'll ever have, and you shot him dead."

"Stay where you are, Jim! I warn you!"

Jim's face hardened.

He was about to squeeze the trig-

ger of his gun when something in the desert between Rawson and the Martian stayed his hand. A flickering and a whirling, a deepening of the shadows which surrounded the Martian.

The shadows became vertical shafts of darkness in a matter of seconds. They converged and became a solid, moving wall closing in about Rawson.

Rawson turned with a startled cry.

The wall was circular and it swept in upon Rawson and embraced him from three sides. He was caught in a dark, circular trap which loomed swiftly up above him in chill and dripping darkness.

The walls of a prison courtyard, the stones mottled and unyielding.

Rawson began to shake.

Far off in the dawn a bell tolled.

Rawson recoiled, his back to the wall of the courtyard, a convulsive horror in his stare.

A cold wind blew across the desert, stirring the sand at his feet. Around the edge of the wall came a procession of guards, walking slowly and two abreast.

The rising sun hid behind a cloud.

"No, no, I don't want to die!" Rawson screamed.

He dropped to his knees in pleading despair as the procession halted directly in front of him. A dark figure in the uniform of a prison warden spoke sharply.

"Get up! Must we help you to walk?"

Rawson cowered back against the wall, pleading, screaming.

Two guards stepped forward and took hold of him. They dragged him to his feet.

The walls of the prison swept away into chill, gray distances.

The electric chair loomed out of shadows, wrapped in a pale blue light.

Rawson was dragged screaming to the chair and strapped in.

Rawson shook his head in dazed horror and saw that he was walking straight forward into a blinding light. He was not condemned after all. His conscience had deceived him.

He had murdered Trask, but the justice of Earth could not touch him. On Mars—

The eyes of the Martian shifted about in the chill dawn as it moved forward to enfold Rawson. Its amoeba-like bulk flowed over him, in hideous, greedy folds.

JIM STOOD motionless, his lips white, the gun still at his shoulder.

He had seen Rawson back away from him, and then rush straight toward the Martian with a scream of terror. He now saw Rawson disappear. He could only guess at the reason for the mad act. But now a great white glow came from the Martian. It swept toward Jim like the waves of an advancing sea. Out of the whiteness came voices, faces, a turbulent tide of moving, shouting people.

Jim sucked in his breath.

The great stadium loomed before him, bathed in dazzling light.

Jim looked down over himself. He saw a firm-fleshed torso, black tights, the legs of a younger man. Far off in the glow he saw the ring, a figure he knew standing in one corner waiting for him.

With a shout he moved forward between the crowds, pushing his way down the aisle, a surge of strength and pride mounting in him. His manager came toward him, slapped him soundly on the back.

"Jim, Jim lad! He's a pushover, Jim! The championship's in the bag, Jim! Go in there, son, and let him have it! Hear those cheers? They're all for you, Jim boy, all for you!"

Light, excitement, joy, pride in a man's own strength. The crowds shouting, pushing; the bright, light-flooded ring; the great moment; the breathless hour of glory and triumph.

Jim stood very still, shaken, white, feeling the gun in his clasp, telling himself that he must not fail.

Even the rope which rasped his palm as he climbed into the ring seemed as real as the gun. But he was aware of the gun too, aware of a dim, dark stirring just beyond the splendid vision.

He was in the ring and he was not in the ring. He was two men at once. Beyond the glimmering stadium lights, beyond that white, steady blaze, luminous spots shifted about in a web of darkness.

The eyes of the Martian beast were trained upon him, with a devouring greediness.

Jim recoiled from the ringside, forcing his mind away from the referee, the big man in white tights facing him, the gleaming faces of the crowd.

His fingers tightened on the gun.

Jim blasted with a sudden, terrible concentration of all his faculties. He felt the gun leap in his clasp, saw the splendid vision dim and vanish.

The Martian desert came wavering back, wrapped in the chill light of dawn. Grayness, chillness, came sweeping back forty million miles from Earth.

The Martian beast shriveled in the searing blast. Its eyes opened, shut, puckered and ran hideously together on its shrinking bulk. Ten eyes became one, swelled to a hugely blinking orb filled with smoky light. Other eyes grew smaller, turned to blind lumps like gall blisters on terrestrial tree stumps.

The Martian became a black, oozing mass of charred jelly. It heaved and bubbled and ran in thin trickles over the sand. It became a thing of no real substance, a smudged residue like the jellyfish patterns cast up on the beaches of Earth by the resistless tides.

Most of the jellyfish gone, dried out by the sun. Just water, dissolving, running away, leaving only a faint, skeletal stain on the white and gleaming sand.

JIM WAS trembling when he turned. The desert had never seemed so chill. Before his eyes stretched only desolation, emptiness, a bleak and hostile land.

He started walking, vaguely aware that he was returning toward the village, but making no effort to follow a single trail.

His anger at fate had something in it of the burnt out land.

But then, miraculously, his despair ebbed a little. A man must carry on, he told himself grimly.

Soon the sun was a bright blaze in the distance and he could see the village, and the gleaming waters of the canal. He had never thought of the village as a part of himself before. It was curious, but he had never actually thought of the village as something he had helped to build.

Jim Malden, realist. Neither too good nor too bad. Just a stubborn fighter, liking his neighbors, liking kids and the rain on his face, and the good morning smell of frying bacon. Dogged, stubborn, wanting to do his part to make the Mars colony the kind of town a man could be proud of.

Jim entered the town and walked down the silent quayside in the dawn, his huge shoulders squared.

His shack had never seemed quite worth defending before. His wife and neighbors, sure—but not the shack itself. But now it wasn't just a tin-walled squatter's shack set down in a chill waste forty million miles from Earth.

It was—home.

Jim opened the door and went inside. His wife had thrown herself down on a sofa, fully clothed, and her face in the dawn light was haggard and worn.

Jim knelt beside the sofa and put his arms around her.

"Time for breakfast, Mary!" he said.

Mary opened her eyes. "Jim!"

"I've come home, Mary! Thinking about Earth all the time, dreaming about Earth, was no good. I've come home to all the things a man never gets around to missing until he's lost them."

His wife stared at him with shining eyes.

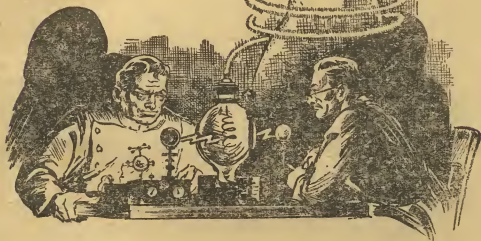
"A man's home is wherever he's fought and struggled and really lived, Jim," she said. "Everybody changes. Everybody starts over every time the sun comes up. I knew you'd find that out someday, Jim. You've come home to Mars!"

Jim kissed her.

Imitation of Death

by
Lester del Rey

Max pictured a beautiful woman taking form from a stream of transmuted elements streaming from the tube.



Councilman Curtis would never cooperate with Max Fleigh's plans for overthrow. But a duplicate of Curtis, a simulacra which could not be distinguished from the real man, would follow Fleigh's orders to perfection. And one man, Jeremiah Greek, knew the secret of making the duplications . . .

MAX FLEIGH'S heavy jowls relaxed and he chuckled without humor as he examined the knots that bound the man at his feet. Quite impersonally, he planted the toe of his boot in Curtis' ribs, listened to the muffled grunt of pain, and decided that the gag was effective. For once, Slim had done a good job, and there was nothing wrong. It was probably unnecessary, anyway, but there could be no bungling when the future of the Plutarchy was at stake.

Incompetence had cost them an empire once, and there would be no third opportunity. The stupid democracies that had called themselves a World Union had colonized the planets and ruled them without plan. And when Mars, Venus, and the Jovian Worlds had revolted and set up a Planet Council, all that Earth could do was to come crawling to it, begging polite permission to join what they should have owned!

But that had been before practical realists had kicked out the dreamers and set up the Plutarchy under an iron discipline that could implement its plans. Now they were heading back toward their lost empire, colonizing the asteroids and establishing claims that gave them a rough rule over the outlaws who had retreated there. With the Council softened up by years of cautious propaganda, they were in a position to ask and receive a Mandate over the scattered planetoids.

It was the opening wedge, and all they needed. Once the asteroids could be given spurious independence to seek a Council seat, they would be ready to strike at the Jovian Worlds. With proper incidents, propaganda, and quislings, plus the planetoids to separate Jupiter from Mars, there could be no question of the outcome. Earth would gain a majority of three votes, and the Council would be the basis of a new and greater Plutarchy.

Fleigh gave the bound body of Curtis another careless kick and went forward to the cabin, where the lanky form of his companion was hunched dourly over the controls of the little space-craft. "How's it going, Slim?"

"So-so." Slim ejected a green stream of narcotic juice and grinned sourly. "But I still say we been crowdin' our luck too hard!"

"Rot! Lay out the right moves, cover all possibilities, out-maneuver your enemies, and you don't need luck! Ever play chess?"

"Nope, can't say I did. Played the horses on Mars, though, time we h'isted the *Euphemeron*. Won, too—after I bought my lucky ghost charm;

been in the chips ever since!" Slim's grin widened, but his face remained stubbornly unconvinced.

Fleigh chuckled. If the planetoid outlaws depended on magic, while the Council visionaries spouted sentimental twaddle, so much the better for the realists. "Charms don't work in politics, Slim. We have to anticipate resistance. And you saw what happened to our fine Martian Councilor Curtis when he decided to expose us and ruin the Mandate!"

"Yeah." Slim's yellow teeth chewed thoughtfully on his cud. "S'pose he'd stood on Mars, though?"

"We'd have dropped hints of just the information he needed on Ceres and trapped him there—as we did. Checkmate!"

"Or check-out! So when he don't come back, they smell a rat—an' I ain't plannin' on bein' around to chew rat-poison. My grandpappy killed a Councilor once—poor grandpappy! ...Hey, there's the rock!"

THERE was no outward sign of life on the barren little planetoid. But as the ship came to a grinding stop in a narrow gorge, a concealing shield snapped over them, and a crudely painted sign blazed out in phosphorescent gaudiness on one rocky wall: *SIMILACRA, LTD. Jeremiah Greek, Prop.* (A line in Greek characters.) Specialist: (Another line in Greek characters.)

Fleigh came out of the lock first and paused while he waited for Slim to shoulder the tarpaulin-covered Curtis and follow. He grinned and pointed at the Greek characters in the sign. "*Magician and wonder-worker; specialist in imitation and mockery.*" he translated. "I looked it up on Mars, so don't go thinking it's some kind of spell... Now if the old fool will open up..."

Max remembered his own preconceptions of Greek's process, pictured various impressive-looking apparatus, which included a large tube through which some sort of lightning zigzagged, and a beautiful woman taking form from a stream of transmuted elements streaming from the

top. It was nothing like such cinematic legerdemain, of course.

"Why ain't English good enough for him?", complained Slim. "I don't go for that magic stuff, Max. We been..."

But the Sigma was already swinging back on its tips to reveal a passage through the rock. A little, shriveled man in tattered shorts and thick-lensed glasses stood motioning them in impatiently, and the door closed silently when they obeyed his summons. They headed down a side passage toward a ramp and the sound of busy humming.

Greek threw open a door and pointed to a table where the duplicate of Councilor Curtis lay, with a duplicate Jeremiah Greek fussing over it and humming through his nose. The guide dropped to a bench and began removing his chest and inserting a fresh power pack between two terminals.

Slim's mouth dropped open and his burden slipped from his back to the floor with a sodden thump, while he stared from one Greek to the other, and back to the first. His fingers were stretched in the ancient sign of the horns as he watched the changing of accumulators, and his voice was hoarse and uncertain. "A damned robot!"

"Not a robot—a simulacrum," denied the owl-eyed man who must have been the original of the metal creature. "I'm a mimesist, not a creator. A robot has independent life, but that's only a limited copy of my memories and habits, like this phoney Curtis. And those tapes you brought me, Fleigh—they stink!"

He gestured toward the spools of the marvelous wire that could record electromagnetic waves of any type of frequency up to several million megacycles. In one corner, a stereo-player was running one off, but the vision screen was fuzzy, and the voice part was a mass of gibberish.

Fleigh scowled at it, and turned back suspiciously to Greek. "Sure you know how to use them? Those were made by—"

"By a fool who had a shield leak in his scanner! Only a few were any good. I was using pancyclic tape before you ever saw a stereo-record. Where'd you think I impress my simulacrum's memory—on a real brain? It takes miles of tape to feed the selectrons! I did the best I could, but... Here, take a look!" He reached into the false Curtis' mouth and did something that made the figure sit up suddenly.

Max went over and muttered into the thing's ear, but after the first few answers it lapsed into sullen silence, and he swung back toward Greek. "I told you Curtis had to be perfect! This wouldn't fool a Jovian!"

"And I told you I wasn't Jehovah—I specialize in mechanical imitations," Greek answered shortly. "Bum tape, bum simulacrum! If you brought me some decent reels, I'll see what I can do, though."

FLEIGH grunted and yanked the tarpaulin off the real Curtis. At the sight, new interest appeared on Greek's face, and he came over to examine the Councilor, but stopped after a cursory look had shown that the man was still alive.

He nodded. "That's more like it, Fleigh. I'll set up an encephalograph and ideoform analyzer and record directly off his mind—it's better than feeding impressions from tapes, anyway, though I always used an editing circuit before. Okay, you'll get something his own mother would swear was perfect."

"When?"

"Depends. Narrow-band analysis would take a couple weeks, but it'd be permanent. If I run an all-wave impressor in, the tapes will be barely affected. I can do it in ten-twelve hours, but your simulacrum will begin to fade in a week, and wash out completely in a month."

"Suits me," Fleigh decided. "We won't need him more than a few days; any place where Slim and I can catch up on our sleep while you finish?"

Greek's double came to life at a



Fleigh came out of the lock first and paused while he waited for Slim to shoulder the tarpaulin-covered Curtis and follow...

signal and led them down a series of rock corridors to a room that lacked nothing in comfort, then went silently out and left them alone. To Fleigh's relief, Slim tested the bed in sour displeasure, pulled a blanket off, and rolled up on the floor, leaving the flotation mattress unoccupied. He had as little use for such luxuries as his boss had for his presence in the same bed. Max climbed in and adjusted the speegee dial to perfect comfort with a relaxed grunt of pleasure.

He had no intention of sleeping, though, while things that concerned him were going on. Three hours later, he heaved out and slipped silently down the rocky halls on sponge-rubber slippers. But his training had covered the stupidity of spy-stereos,

and there was nothing stealthy about his entry into the laboratory. Greek looked up from a maze of wires and gadgets with faint surprise but no suspicion.

"Couldn't sleep," Fleigh volunteered apologetically. "I was wondering if you had any barbiturates?"

A few minutes later he took the tablet from Greek's double and turned back down the hallway with a muttered thanks. He had learned all he wanted to know. Both Greeks and Curtises were present and accounted for, where they belonged, and the mimesist was busy about his work; there was no funny business involved. Actually, he had expected none, but it never did any harm to make sure of such things when dealing with men who were outside the

law of either the Plutarchy or the Council.

Slim was snoring and kicking about on the floor when he returned, and he grinned as he plopped back onto the mattress. The outlaws were useful enough now. But once Earth took over the Mandate, something would have to be done about them; too many were the wrong sort to fit into the Plutarchy. Fleigh stretched with a self-satisfied yawn, and slipped into well-earned sleep.

GREEK'S simulacrum awakened them in the morning and led them back to the laboratory, where the scientist was waiting beside the imitation Curtis. The real Councilor must have been drugged, for he lay unconscious on one of the tables. Fleigh wasted only a casual glance at him, and then turned to the new simulacrum as Greek flipped it on.

This time his tests were longer, and there were no sullen silences from the imitation. Its response was quick, sure, and completely correct; the real Curtis could have done no better, and Fleigh stepped back at last and nodded his approval. He'd demanded a perfect simulacrum, and it had been delivered.

"You're sure it has a good strong desire to live?" he asked briefly as he fished into his bag for the little prepared relay that was ready.

Greek smiled faintly. "They all have that—they couldn't pass as normal men without it. And if your dimensions were correct, you should have no trouble installing your relay."

He stripped aside the blouse, to reveal a small cavity in the back of the simulacrum, with a bundle of little wires which Fleigh hooked onto the relay. It slipped in, and locked firmly. Greek unclipped the tiny switch from inside the machine's mouth. The animation within the simulacrum disappeared at once, to snap back again as a switch on Fleigh's bag was pressed. A little circle of the pancyclic strip moved over a scanner inside the bag, sending out a complex wave, while a re-

ceiver in the simulacrum's back responded by closing the relay. Then the animation was cut off again, and came back at once on a second pressure of the switch.

"Attempted removal of the relay will destroy all circuits, just as you ordered," Greek assured the operative. "Well?"

Fleigh's face mirrored complete satisfaction. "You get the fire emeralds, as promised!"

He reached into the bag and came out with a little bundle, a grin stretched across his face. It stayed there while Greek moved forward quickly, to stagger back with a chopped-off scream as the slugs poured into his face and exploded his head into a mangled mess of blood and grey tissue!

For a second, the Greek double moved forward, but it turned with a shriek and went down the hall at a clumsy run as Fleigh ripped the smoking gun from the package. He let it go. Curtis' head dissolved under a second series of slugs, and only the simulacrum of the Councilor was left in the laboratory with the two men.

Slim closed his mouth slowly and reached for his green narcotic, but he made no protest. The other moved about, gathering up combustibles and stacking them in a corner, then setting fire to the pile.

"Which takes care of almost everything, Slim," Fleigh said calmly. They headed out and down the hall toward their ship, with the imitation Curtis moving quietly along behind. Another slug from the gun destroyed the lock on the big Sigma, and they pushed through, out into the rocky gorge. "Nothing left to chance, and a perfect red herring to cover up Curtis' disappearance."

SLIM DUCKED into the lock and went forward to the controls. "Uh-huh. Grandpappy'd sure of admired you, Max! Used to look just the same when he drilled somebody he didn't like... All set for take-off?"

"Forgetting anything, Slim?"

The outlaw looked up in puzzled surprise, while Fleigh shook his head and went over to the receiver. There was no sense in trying to teach the fool anything, apparently, but at least he might have learned elementary caution from his mode of life. The Plutarch operative ripped out the tape from the illegal all-wave recorder and slipped it into a play-back slot, while slow comprehension crossed the other's face.

But everything was in order, with the usual hash of faint signals on various frequencies. There were no signs of a strong response, such as would have been made by any attempt on Greek's part to double-cross him with a call to the outside. He set the receiver to record, and went toward the rear cabin and the simulacrum, while the ship blasted off and headed toward Mars.

The false Curtis was already at a table, and groping through a bag of notes the original Councilor had carried. It looked up as Fleigh came in, grimaced, and went on organizing the papers before it. The operative dropped to a chair with his familiar humorless chuckle.

"You realize your life is dependent on obedience, uh—Curtis?"

"Would I have let you kill myself otherwise?" the thing asked grimly. "Leave that control gadget of yours where I can get it, and you'll feel the difference between my hands and mere flesh ones! But meantime, I'll cooperate, since I have no choice; I suppose you intend helping me with my speech before the Council?"

Fleigh's appreciation for the peculiar genius of Greek went up several points, as he assented tersely. The thing was perfect, or so nearly so that it seemed to consider itself the real man. There would be no trouble on that score. As for the control bag—he had no intention of letting that out of his hands until the simulacrum was turned off.

It gestured toward the notes with a motion peculiar to Curtis. "You'd only ruin anything you edited, Fleigh. I'm perfectly capable of writ-

ing the thing myself, and it'll sound like me! But if I'm going to give you a clean sheet and not make the whole Council suspicious, I'll need more information than I have. I must have the whole picture, so that I can take care of all objections without running counter to what some other Councilors may know already. Also, I think you'd better learn to address me as Councilor Curtis!"

"Quite so, Councilor," Fleigh agreed, and this time the amusement in his laugh was genuine. "Now if you'll tell me what you know of our plans and methods, I'll fill in the blanks. But I want to see that speech, when you're finished."

IT WAS amazing, the amount of evidence Curtis had managed to accumulate in a brief week; or perhaps much of it had been in his hands before, and only needed organizing against what they had let him find on Ceres. It was enough to have ruined all hopes of Earth's getting the Mandate, and seriously endangered her relations with the Planet Council in addition. Fleigh made a mental note to press for an investigation of some of the outland operatives as he began filling in the missing links in the other's information.

Curtis took the facts down in a note-book, grim-faced and silent, checked them back, and reached for the typewriter. The first part of the speech he had meant to deliver needed but slight modification, and Fleigh read it over the simulacrum's shoulder as it operated the machine. Then the going grew tougher, and there were long pauses while the thing considered, revising a word here, or changing a paragraph there. It disregarded Fleigh's suggestions with the same disdain that would have been on the real Councilor's face, and the operative began to realize that it was justified. When it came to writing speeches, he was only an amateur, and this was professional work.

He was beginning to regret that the thing could have a life of only

from a week to ten days, when it finished; Earth could have used such a propagandist, particularly one accepted on the Council as Mars' chief representative! Curtis' speeches had always been good, but he had never realized that the man's talents would have been equally good on propaganda. It was hard to believe that this was fiction, as he listened to the calm, assured voice running through it, apparently reciting only the simple truth, and yet coloring every word with some trick of oratory that seemed to make it glow with virtue and integrity.

"Perfect!" he commented when it was finished. He cut off the relay signal, watched the simulacrum slip to the floor, and went forward to the control cabin with a full measure of satisfaction. Earth could not fail!

And already the red disc of Mars was large and close on the viewplate. Fleigh hadn't realized the time the writing of the speech had taken, but he did not regret a second of it as Slim began nursing the ship down through the thin atmosphere toward the Solar Center.

THE TASTE of coming victory was strong in Max Fleigh as he waited outside the Martian House the next day, but Slim was still glum and morose. Part of that was probably due to his orders to stay out of the usual outlaw haunts on the planet, where the police might have picked him up and ruined the whole plan. The rest, Fleigh decided, was just his natural fear of what he could not understand.

The outlaw was grumbling and turning his lucky ghost charm over and over in his palms. "Leavin' the thing run around this way! We been lucky, Max, but tain't reasonable to figger it'll hold! You shoulda let me tail him!"

"Sure, Slim. People expect him to go around with you at his heels, no doubt!" Fleigh spat dango seeds out of the open car window, and took another bite of the cool fruit before going on. "We have to let him circulate; no Councilor just back from a two-week trip would hole up before

this meeting, when he had instructions to pick up and last minute details piling in. Besides, we're not dealing with Curtis now, but with a machine. And it knows who its master is! The minute I cut the relay, or it gets ten miles away from me—no life!"

He spotted the simulacrum coming down the steps and jumped out to open the car door. Slim grunted dourly, pulling his chauffeur's cap further down over his forehead, but he took the curt order from Curtis with no other protests and headed the big car toward the Council Chambers. The Councilor passed over two slips of elaborate pasteboard and leaned back against the seat.

"Passes for the two of you. Are you sure Slim knows what he's to do?"

There was a disgusted sound from the front, but Fleigh ignored it. "He'd better; we've been over it often enough. But go ahead and make sure."

The simulacrum ticked off the points with incisive authority. The Council Chamber was radiation proof, and since Curtis would not be trusted with the relay signal, the success of the whole thing depended on Slim's behavior. Max had secured a duplicate of his signal generator which the outlaw was to use outside the Assembly, while Fleigh went inside with his and waited. The operative had developed complete confidence in the ability of the false Curtis, and he was sure of his own part. It was all up to Slim, but there was no reason for him to fail, and he had always taken orders well enough before.

Actually, it all went off with perfect smoothness. The guards passed him in after a careful scrutiny of his permit, and he carried the briefcase that held the generator up to the gallery and turned it on. Seconds later, the simulacrum came through the big doorway, with only a slight flicker of uncertainty as the anti-radiation shield touched him and he passed from one generator to the other.

Curtis walked along the aisle with the proper confidence and attention to his friends, presented his credentials for the purely perfunctory examination, and turned off into one of the little council-rooms. Two of the other Martian Councilors followed him, and passed out of Fleigh's field of view, but he was not worried about that. Slim came slouching down the gallery stairs and dropped into a seat beside the operative, putting the duplicate generator between his feet.

"Satisfied?"

"Perfect," Fleigh assured him. They would reverse it going out. After that, Curtis would announce that he was leaving on a long trip to Ganymede, and they would be able to dispose of the simulacrum without any parts left to show what he was.

THEN CURTIS came back into the main chamber. Apparently the Council had been waiting for his return, for the Sergeant-at-Arms waved for order, and the meeting be-

gan, with almost no preliminaries. Earth brought up the subject of the Mandate, and the head of the Venus Council began to come to his feet. But Curtis was up first, and the Chair recognized him.

Fleigh relaxed completely as the familiar words of the speech began to come to him, while the Venusans glanced about in surprise, and then began to listen. A moment later they were under the sway of his oratory. The single speech should do it, since the question had been tentatively decided in favor of Earth at the last meeting, pending Curtis' investigation. By night, the Mandate should be a *fait accompli*, and Earth could begin moving out her mercenary legions in the squat "mining" freighters.

Fleigh had a pretty good idea of who would lead them. He'd been in line for promotion for some time already, and the Plutarch had dropped hints of the outcome of success. It would be good to leave the dubious position of operative and become a

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(Continued From Page 83)

legally recognized governor of the mandate planetoids, to settle down and begin organizing his own private little plans for the Plutarch's job!

Slim nudged him with a bony knee, but Fleigh was too wrapped in his own thoughts to bother until the other seized his elbow and hissed at him. Then he came out of his daydreams. Something was going on—the Councilors were paying too careful attention, and the Earth Delegation didn't look right! In a second, his mind was back on the speech, and the words came to a chilling focus in his ears.

"...found the organization inconceivably complex. And yet the basic pattern is old—old as the barbarism that prompted it. Gentlemen, I have only my word as evidence now, but I can name names and give exact locations that will enable our Planetary Police to confirm every word of it before night falls on this meeting. The Plutarch of Earth, on the twentieth of April, forty-two years ago, gave the following orders, which I quote..."

Fleigh grabbed for Slim's generator, and yanked the button savagely, but still the damning words went on, detail piling on exact detail, while Secret Servicemen moved forward to cut the speaker off from the Earth Delegates. Their rudeness was an open declaration that Earth was immediately severed from the Council! Max ripped out the generator, crushing the delicate tubes in his hands. He was stamping on his own device at the same time, but the voice went on unchecked!

Down on the floor, Curtis looked upwards without pausing in his detailed list of evidence, found the operative's eye, and grinned. Then he resumed his normal gravity and went on!

Slim's hands were trembling and fumbling over his charm. Fleigh practically carried him to the aisle, and dragged him along as he made his way up the infinite distance to the gallery door. Every step was made with the expectation of a shouted order from Curtis that would send

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the big explosive slugs tearing through him, but it did not come. Instead, there was only the quiet continuance of the speech, and Slim's hoarse prayers to the ghosts of the charm to save them.

Surprisingly, the doors opened in the hands of the courteous guards, and the hall was before them, with no police in sight. Max cut Slim's babbled relief off with a crisp whisper. "We're not out of it, you fool! Ten to one, it's cat and mouse, with us the losers. But if we're going to make use of the tenth chance, shut up! Walk, damn it, and *grin!*"

THERE WAS another flight of stairs leading down, a long hall, and a second door that opened promptly and politely as they neared it. Then the main steps led down to the street. It was impossible that the simulacrum could have given no orders for their arrest; as impossible as that the relay could be tampered with! But the big car waited at the

curb, and there were still no police.

Reaction left Slim drooling narcotic juice over the hands that were caressing and kissing the charm. Fleigh yanked him savagely into the car and gunned the electros. It went tearing out into the street under full power, while a wild yell of despair ripped out of the outlaw's throat.

"My ghost charm!" He was pawing frantically at the door lock, with his face swivelled around toward the bright receding twinkle of the metal piece on the sidewalk behind. "Max! Max!"

"Shut up and stay put! There must be a hundred more of those things you can buy if we get out of this." Fleigh freed a hand and forced the cringing fool back into the seat, where he relaxed woodenly, terror fading out to sullen despair that gradually mingled with doubt.

"Then let's get out quick, Max! Oncet we hit Earth, I know a guy's got another. Tain't as good a ghost with it as mine, but it ain't no fake,

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neither! You gotta give me enough to get it, Max!"

Fleight hid his thin grin from the other. They'd need more than a ghost charm or even planning if they ever went to Earth! He'd seen what happened to failures there, and he knew that it would be better to walk into the nearest Planet Police Bureau. But he reached over soothingly and patted the outlaw's shoulder. "Sure, Slim. We'll get you another, maybe before we leave here."

It shouldn't be hard to find one of the charm peddlers, and dope up a story. There was a place on Venus where they could hide, once Slim worked up his nerve to pilot them there—and provided that their luck held long enough to keep the police from impounding the little craft. But the hideout would take money, and that had to come first. Planning took care of that; he'd always been careful to avoid tying his personal fortune up in the Earth Operative strongholds.

He swung the car around a corner, glanced up at a jeweler's sign, and cursed without slowing down. The red light was on, warning that it had been raided. One of his secret quarters gone!

He stopped obediently for a through highway, and roared on. But the second was no better. There was sweat on his forehead, and his hands were slippery with it when he headed out Mars Center Canal into the suburbs. Damn Curtis! It was impossible for him to have found the hideout—or should have been!

But there was no warning light in the window of the third and last place. The lawyer's faded sign swung in the thin wind, and everything was serenely peaceful. Fleight jerked Slim out of the car, set its automatic chauffeur, and let it go rolling off.

Then he moved up the steps with the outlaw at his heels, listened cautiously at the door, and nodded. The steady click of a typewriter indicated that the scrawny little secretary was doing the routine office-work, and Sammy must have been undis-

(Continued On Page 88)

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turbed. He opened the door eagerly, to a louder clicking from the typewriter.

ABOVE IT, Curtis looked up with an assured smile, and waved the grandfather of all hand weapons at him in genial greeting!

"Come in, Max," he said cordially. "Like my double's speech?"

Slim's trembling hand fumbled out automatically in the sign of the horns. His blanched mouth worked furiously, but the words refused to come until Curtis turned to him. Then jerked back, waving his fingers. "He couldn'ta... We'd of beat him... *Max!* He's dead! He's a ghost!"

Fleigh's hand groped for him, and missed. Another apparition came into the room from the inner office. This one was a shrivelled, little man, with owl-eyes that blinked at them out of thick-lensed spectacles. Jeremiah Greek picked up a pencil with a contented grin, drew it across the bare flesh of his arm; and held the red mark that rose on the skin out toward the outlaw.

"In the flesh," he stated.

But Slim was no longer listening. Slowly, as if moved by worn-down clock-works, he slid down the wall and his dead-faced head bent forward to meet the knees that drew upwards. There he stayed, motionless.

"If that's catatonic return to the foetal position, it's an all-time record for speed," Curtis commented with quiet interest. "Sit down, Max. You seem to have overestimated your companion's moral fiber, and underestimated your opponent's. Never count on luck! It takes planning to get anywhere in this universe... By the way, Jeremiah Greek is the original inventor of pancyclic tape: you should have checked up on him, before you trusted him, and found out the way your Plutarchy gypped him out of his invention. He wasn't the sort of man who'd cooperate very well with Earth. In fact, he was the sort who could and would fake a

tape for your recorder to cover up the call he put in under my code to the Martian Council!"

Fleigh moved toward the chair as the gun commanded, only half-conscious of the words. He sank into a sitting position, his mind churning savagely and getting nowhere. *Play along! Keep your eyes open! If you let the other guy make the moves, he'll slip up somewhere.* It was basic training to operatives, though there was uncertainty in even that logic now. But there was nothing else to do.

Greek picked up the account. "With a promise of secrecy from Councilor Curtis, and a chance to do legitimate research here, I felt quite free to drop my very doubtful loyalty to my native planet, Mr. Fleigh. Those two simulacra you shot were crude, and the brain and blood imitation was quite poor, I thought. But fortunately, you didn't investigate thoroughly."

"I didn't think the relay control could fail. So you simply let the simulacrum collapse and took its place?" Fleigh was forcing himself to casualness, while his brain hashed over all the rules for upsetting a trap. But it returned inevitably to the basic need of stalling for time, and keeping them talking.

"Not at all," Curtis corrected him. "We were late returning, so they simply used an all-wave receiver to record your control signal on pancyclic tape, inserted it into a generator, and the simulacrum had his freedom in his pocket two minutes after you turned on your control in the Council Chamber. You really didn't think I'd leave my speech in the middle to chase you, when I had a perfectly good double, surely?"

FLEIGH'S eyes darted to Slim, but there would be no help from that quarter. Not a muscle had moved since the outlaw had collapsed onto the floor!

He forced himself to relax deliberately. Relax! As long as he was tensed up in the chair, they'd watch

(Continued On Page 90)



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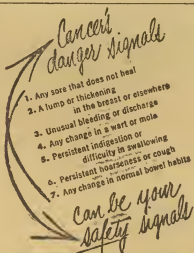
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him, but they'd be less cautious if he seemed to abandon hope. And he was younger and faster than they were, in spite of his fat.

Greek's amused cackle broke his chain of thought. "So simple a solution, Max! But of course, an involute brain would miss just that... That's fine, relax! And when you start anything, you'll be surprised to find how quickly and efficiently a couple of sentimental visionary fools can shoot! Or do you think, Councilor, that we're really such fools?"

"I doubt it," Curtis answered, with the same hard amusement in his voice. "As I see it, a reactionary is simply unable to adapt to new conditions; he's filled with a blind, stubborn dependence on the rude past. And brute force is an admission of that intellectual poverty. Max, you should have studied history better. The addle-pated idealists have a peculiar habit of winning."

They stood there, grinning and studying their captive with the one thing in the universe he had never encountered—open contempt. Fleigh wet his lips, glancing from one to the other, and considering the hopeless distance to the door.

And suddenly the beginnings of an idea permeated through the hard knot of fear in his brain. They didn't believe in brute force! They wouldn't kill him without provocation; and they couldn't turn him in to the police!

He swung back to Curtis, and this time there was a grin on his own lips. "You said you promised Mr. Greek secrecy, Councilor. Not immunity, because the old law against making robots is too strong; and simulacra would be considered robots. Well, just how do you figure you can turn me over to the authorities without breaking that promise and having him strung up beside me?"

"I never meant to turn you in," Curtis answered.

"And you said yourself that brute force was stupid!"

"Quite true." It was Greek who

answered this time. "But the rules of justice sometimes invoke it. The penalty for treason, like that for robbery, is still death, though we've abandoned most other reasons for capital punishment."

"Then turn me in! Or kill me yourselves—and you'll find that brute force really is stupid on Mars! The police here are the best in the system, which is why I always preferred to do my little jobs elsewhere. You amateurs wouldn't have a chance. Well?"

But he knew that he had them, and the taste of freedom in his mouth was sweet after the fear and hopelessness of their gloating power. He did not wait for an answering nod from them, but turned from his chair in calm assurance, and headed for the door.

GREEK'S voice interrupted his exit. "Just a minute, Max! You really should know all your mistakes, and there's one we forgot... Never use a perfect simulacrum! It can't be perfect without thinking exactly like its original; the same mind must operate the same way. Your simulacrum was limited only by the time it could exist—and it knew that, as well as knowing it was useless among real men!"

"So what?" Fleigh asked jauntily, and reached for the door. "And so long!"

Steel hands grabbed him, and a pair of arms with inhuman strength picked him up and turned him around to face the two men. Curtis dropped his gun onto the table with a slow, deliberate motion, holding the struggling operative with a single hand, while he stretched the other out to Jeremiah Greek. Then he turned toward the door, dragging the fat body of Fleigh along without effort.

"So when you're found dead in your house, killed by the robot you were having built in some fiendish plot against Councilor Curtis, I don't think the police will worry—beyond

(Continued On Page 92)

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seeing that both you and the robot are thoroughly beyond repair!"

There was bitterness in the voice of the simulacrum, but it was resolute and determined bitterness. "When the real Curtis replaced me in the Council Chamber, he meant to make my few days of existence as pleasant as possible. But even a limited simulacrum likes to be useful. Come along, Max."

Max Fleigh went along; there was nothing else he could do, as the duplicate of Curtis tossed him into a small car and began driving back toward the town and the house that had been his Martian home and would soon be his tomb. He couldn't even think straight, for his head insisted on dwelling on nonsense.

Slim had been right, after all, and his ghost charm had brought him luck, even after he lost it. But for the man who had refused to believe in it, there was no hope for such insane oblivion. There was simply no hope of any kind.



The mayor's wife gasped as she saw the tiny car.

Parking, Unlimited

by Noel Loomis

It was a wonderful plan, a boom to humanity. And solving the parking problem would make a fortune for Slim and me. But when the secret got out . . .

I COULD have taken that three hundred dollars and gone to school for a year, by washing dishes two hours a night. I had worked for that money, too; shocking wheat for twelve hours a day in the August sun is no vacation. But Slim Coleman convinced me that we could run that three hundred into enough to take us both for four years.

I hadn't even had time to get a haircut—and I did want a haircut; now it was pretty shaggy.

But Slim, diplomat that he is, didn't even seem to notice my hair.

"I've got a real deal," he said, and his deep eyes were shining with enthusiasm. "Have you got any money?"

"Some," I said cautiously.

"It takes three hundred. Have you got that much?"

I had intended to say no, but Slim has a way of fixing his deep, somber eyes on you that gives ineffable dignity even to a touch. "Okay," I said hopelessly. "What's the bite?"

"Well, you see, it's like this." We went into a drug store and ordered cokes, and Slim characteristically insisted on paying for them when he

probably couldn't have bought a package of cigarettes. I let him pay, too. I had three hundred and one dollars, and I had no intention of parting with a nickel of it—except a dollar for a haircut.

"I was using the brain-finder and I ran across the owner of this unused garage in the Loop. His name is Richard LaBombard and he's got a lot of parking lots through the Loop, and you know what he's doing?"

I saw the waitress stare at me. I swallowed and tried to listen to Slim. "No."

Slim was staring at the waitress. "He loads them up with used cars every day so those who are hunting a parking place can't get in," he said absently. "You know what he wants?"

"Well, no." I never could figure those things, but Slim could see the angles a mile away. He was always good at that.

"He's made an application for a permit to build a parking ramp that will cover a solid block down in the middle of the Loop. Now, if he can build a place to park eight or ten thousand cars, naturally that one spot is going to be the best business spot in the city. And Richard LaBombard holds leases or options on half the store space around that block. He stands to make millions."

"Where does my three hundred come in?"

Slim ignored the acidulousness in my voice. "Well, as I say, I followed him with the brain-finder and found him holding hands with the mayor's wife at a skating rink—and the next day I—ah—persuaded him to give me an option to lease this building on the edge of the Loop."

"You mean you blackmailed him."

"That's a harsh word. I prefer *persuaded* myself. After all, he wouldn't want something like that to come up just when he's finagling for that permit, would he? Anyway, I paid five dollars for the option."

"That's unusual. You've got some of your own money in this deal."

Like a gentleman, Slim ignored that thrust. "Tomorrow is the first. I've got to raise two hundred and fifty for a month's rent. We'll need fifty more for deposits on light, heat, and power. We'll make a million within a month. We split fifty-fifty."

"How do you make the million?"

SLIM LOOKED around. Nobody was near; he leaned close and whispered. "This is the invention of the century. We can solve the parking problem of the entire city. You know how it is—you can't even get into a parking lot after ten a.m. Lots of businesses are threatening to put branches out in the suburbs."

"Yes?"

"The parking problem must be solved if the city is to survive," Slim said dramatically.

"Okay, but how can you make any more out of an old building than anybody else?"

He whispered again. "I can create a magnetic field that will slow electrons down to almost zero velocity. A car will shrink to about four inches long." He stared at me intently. "Do you see what that will mean?"

I sighed. "I'm afraid I do. If it works, you can pack a million cars in a space that ordinarily would hold about a thousand." I tried to stop my enthusiasm, but it was too late. The idea was taking hold. "And that garage is right across the street from Newton's, the biggest department store in the city."

"The parking problem was intensified last week when they abolished parking on the street so the afternoon traffic could get through. Boy, this is the spot for us!" Slim said.

"Will it take all of three hundred dollars?" I asked Slim.

He nodded gravely, "Every cent. And then it will be a shoestring."

"Wouldn't two hundred and ninety-nine be enough?"

"No," said Slim. He looked back at me. He had always been that way; he never compromised with my money.

I shuddered when I saw my hair in the mirror as we left. But, I knew I'd better keep the dollar for cigarettes....

We paid the first month's rent; I put up the deposits, and Slim brought a bunch of wire and stuff from his basement, and we worked till one o'clock winding gadgets and building a regular stall to run a car into. This garage had a ramp going to the basement floor, and we decided to use that floor. Also, there was an old freight elevator up to the second and third floors, and we could park a few on the main floor and send a few upstairs when we had time, because of course we didn't want the secret to get out.

Slim tried the squeezer-upper when he got it finished. He set a couple of old saw-horses inside and turned on the juice. It was uncanny to see those things shrink. You could even hear the legs scrape on the concrete floor as they pulled together. In just about three seconds the saw-horses were an inch high. Then Slim reversed the current and they expanded to normal size again. All this in about one breath.

"But look," I said, suddenly stricken with a horrible thought. "What if you don't get a car back exactly the size it was at first? Then new tires wouldn't fit, new parts wouldn't fit—oh, my goodness!" I was abruptly overwhelmed with the enormity of such damage.

"That's all taken care of," he assured me. "The electrons in any given object seem to have a tendency to resume their former orbits if they get a chance. In other words, if I expand a car to almost its normal size and then cut off the power, the electrons will sort of coast into their original orbits and the car will resume its exact former size. Sort of a quantum jump, I suppose."

I breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Of course, if you go too far, you'll have an oversize car, but you could reduce it again," said Slim. "Now in the morning we'll hang out a parking sign and let them

drive onto the main floor. You run the cars into the basement, and we'll have this thing down under the ramp, out of sight." Slim's deep eyes were glowing. "We'll make a million," he said, rubbing his hands.

* * *

WELL, BY the end of the next day it began to look as if we had, indeed, solved the most urgent problem of modern civilization—the parking problem. We had a sign out that said, *Parking All Day 50c—No one Turned Away*, and by the end of the day we had taken in nearly five hundred dollars.

But it was a mankiller. I handed out claim checks and drove cars to the basement. Slim reduced them and hauled them across the room to a lineup. That was funny—seeing a car shrink to three or four inches long. It was an irresistible impulse to pick it up, but when you tried, you changed your mind. The cars were practically as heavy in their small size as in their big size, and that made it something of a problem to get them moved around.

We had borrowed a toe-and-heel, a sort of crowbar with rollers on it, and with the reduced friction from the extremely small tires of the cars, it wasn't too hard to move them, but it was still a mankiller to move a thousand in one day, and move each twice. We took turns at the reducer. I could handle them best by catching them under the front axle, but we decided to make them six inches long so it would be easier. The metal in its smaller size seemed as tough as it had been normally, but the parts were pretty small to get hold of with anything strong enough to handle them.

Slim solved this problem the second day when he put a long piece of gas-pipe on the heel-and-toe and shrank it considerably. The second day, too, we had two men working upstairs. The third day we had a gadget made so that we could roll a car's front wheel on it and then pull the car anywhere. That was when we began to get our breath.

The other way had been tough. I don't know how Slim stood it at all; if I hadn't worked in the wheat-fields all summer I would have fallen from exhaustion.

We had two of those gadgets made and then we tilted the reducing stall a little. We'd block the wheels with a two-by-four after we had a car inside, then reduce it, take out the block, let the car roll onto the gadget and haul it away. We arranged them on the concrete floor in rows about four feet apart. When somebody came back to get their car out we had to pinch-bar the car back up on the gadget and wheel it to the stall.

* * *

The second week we had two stalls, one reducing and one expanding, and Slim was talking of having a new sloping floor put in to help in handling. By that time we were handling two thousand cars a day; you can do your own arithmetic.

On the last day of the month, La-Bombard came in to collect his next month's rent. He was all eyes and he said he didn't see how we could do it. "You took in twenty-two hundred cars yesterday and this building won't hold over six hundred," he said, his eyes darting all around. "You must have a fast turnover."

Slim kidded him. "We put 'em on the roof," he said, and paid him and pushed him out. I didn't like the look in that man's eyes as he left.

"Well," said Slim exuberantly to me, "we're sitting on thirty thousand dollars. Think you can get through college on that?"

"I hope I can take time off to get a haircut," I said fervently. It was embarrassing to have people look at me and suddenly snicker and turn away to hide their faces. The trouble was, we didn't dare turn the reducing over to anybody else, and so we both worked like robots.

The boys upstairs put the car on the ramp, the car came downstairs and went through the reducer, came out on the other side and onto a platform. We had a tow-truck that just backed up, reached down a steel platform under the front axle, and walked away. It was funny to see that two-ton truck hauling a toy car across the floor.

Yes, we had a deal. Late at night, after we'd closed up and had time for some coffee, Slim would talk about how we were going to build a chain of parking ramps across the country.

"We'll make billions," he said, his deep eyes shining with a far-away fanaticism that only Slim Coleman can exhibit, "and we'll be known as the saviors of civilization. We'll call ourselves Parking Unlimited."

Then one night the building inspector came. We were just resting for a moment, with no cars in sight, when we looked around and there he stood. It startled us, because absolutely no one was allowed in the basement.

"What do you want?" Slim asked, and just then a car appeared on the ramp, coming down to the reducer.

"I'm the building inspector. I'm checking on the weight you're putting in this building. It's an old building, you know." And all the time his eyes were darting everywhere.

"Did LaBombard send you?" asked Slim. The car was halfway down.

"Well, not exactly; we're interested in this from the safety angle."

A second car's nose showed around the curve. I began to sweat.

"Okay," said Slim. "Look us over. We do the parking upstairs."

"What do you do down here?" The inspector stared at the reducing stall.

"That's a new-fangled washing apparatus."

"What are all these toy cars on the floor down here?"

BY THE beginning of the second month we had a moving ramp.

I practically swallowed my tongue. I had known that was coming.

But Slim said casually, "Oh, we're making Christmas presents in our spare time." The first car was about to enter the reducing stall.

The inspector stared at the two thousand cars on the basement floor. "They look plenty real."

I held my breath. If he should ever try to pick up one of those cars, it would be all over for us. I could just imagine what two thousand owners would say if they should find out their cars had been reduced to six inches. People are not too broad-minded about such things.

But Slim had him by the elbow. With the savage shake of his head at me and the reducing stall, he said, "I'll take you up and show you around." They rode the ramp upstairs.

Right then I wanted to lie down and pass out with sheer relief, but the cars were beginning to pile up. I worked like a horse for half an hour, doing double duty. Then Slim came back with a haunting sadness in his eyes, and a faraway look that was not encouraging.

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "He knows too much. Too many parking-lot people are putting on the heat."

"You mean he knows how we are packing them in?"

"No, but he knows that we are taking in as many as three thousand cars a day, while half the parking lots in town are begging for customers."

I sighed. "When are we leaving?"

Slim's eyes were looking far away. "At the end of the week," he said. "We've got enough money in the bank to pay all our bills. We've got a couple thousand in the safe, and we'll take in three or four more. Tomorrow's Friday. The next day will be Saturday and we should handle four thousand cars. We blow Saturday night. We'll go to the coast."

"Will I have time to get a hair-cut?" I asked hopefully.

"No. Get your hair cut in L. A." He went on dreamily, "We should have five thousand. We can start up again, and this time we'll start off right, so we can run indefinitely without anybody catching on. We've got some capital to work with now."

* * *

FRIDAY was a good day. Slim only chuckled when I told him there was a man sitting across the street with a pad of paper and a pencil, tallying the cars that came in and those that went out.

"We're good for tomorrow," said Slim, "then they can have it. I've got plane reservations for two a.m."

He didn't say so, but I think he was getting as tight inside as I was. We were close—thirty hours from five thousand dollars—enough to go through college in good shape.

Saturday was a bell-ringer. By six o'clock in the evening we had parked over four thousand cars, and they were still coming. The safe was full of tens and twenties, all nicely wrapped and labeled, and our two suitcases were beside it. Still the money was pouring in. Nine cars a minute. One every seven seconds. Two hundred and fifty dollars an hour. It was better than a mint. The basement floor was beginning to fill up.

At six-thirty Slim was bringing a car back to full size and saying to me, "Watch this one. This is the building inspector's car; he's trying to get a clue."

At that exact moment a voice spoke behind us. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen." It was one of those clear, soft voices with little tinkling bells in it. Know what I mean?

Slim turned and stared. "Madam," he said, "don't you know the sign says 'No Admittance'?"

She looked repentant. "I'm sorry." She looked hurt. "I didn't think you gentlemen would mind." She turned as if to go.

I saw Slim melting down. I didn't blame him. That girl could have melted tungsten. Yes, I recognized her from her pictures in the society section—the mayor's wife.

Slim was apologizing. "I beg your pardon, Madam. It's quite all right. Your loveliness and radiant beauty just startled us. We—"

While Slim was laying it on thick, the building inspector's car was expanding. Now it became considerably too big for the stall and split it like a stick of dynamite going off in a shoe-box. It split it into a thousand pieces and then stood there, a passenger car seven feet tall.

The mayor's wife gave a little scream of delight. Slim gave a horrified gasp. I tried to faint.

"Oh," she said, "such a big car!"

Slim moaned. "Please, Madam, will you leave now?"

She looked hurt again. "Yes, but will you please put this package in my car?"

"I will," said Slim, through tight jaws. "But—"

"Why, that looks just like the building inspector's car," she said, wide-eyed. "It's his number, too."

"Madam," begged Slim, "you're no dummy; please leave now and let us get on with our work."

She walked upstairs dubiously. Slim was studying the enormous car with a hopeless look on his face. Orders for cars to be taken out were pouring down the chute.

"What are we going to do now? We can't run that car into the other stall, because it's too big. It will take all night to build another stall, and no doubt the inspector is waiting up there with a squad of cops, hoping something will happen. After all, we're costing LaBombard a million bucks." His eyes opened suddenly. "I'll bet he sent the woman down here to spy on us."

A car came down the ramp and went into the reducing stall, and Slim automatically set the dial.

THE TELEPHONE rang, and I could hear the voice from where

I stood. "The building inspector wants his car."

"Coming right up," Slim said.

Then he looked at me. I looked at him. "Get that safe open," he jerked out. I dived for it.

I was spinning the combination when I heard the voices. The building inspector was riding the ramp down to the basement. Then I heard more voices and saw the bottom half of two cops and Richard LaBombard on the freight elevator.

Slim hissed to me. "Make it snap-py!"

I was trying to, but I couldn't get the thing open. Five thousand dollars in that safe and I couldn't get it. I spun the dial frantically and started over.

But now the ramp was filled with people. The cops were getting off the elevator. I jumped up and ran over to where Steve was standing.

The building inspector was staring bug-eyed at his huge car. Somebody went around the stall and saw the six-inch car crawling out. Somebody else took hold of the stall and shook it. "Where's my car? What's going on?"

Well, a mob is a funny thing. In about half a minute there were eight hundred people in that basement, and all of them tearing apart the reducing stall.

Slim and I hesitated no longer. We ran up the stairway and sifted out through the crowd...

* * *

At three o'clock in the morning Slim said to me, "You think that brakeman will kick us off?"

The brakeman came to us, sitting up there in the fresh night breeze on top of a carload of lettuce going east from California. He looked at me and then, as if he didn't believe it, he held his lantern up and examined my head all the way around.

"Why don't you go back to the farm? This ain't no life for you," he growled.

"I am considering that very seriously," I said with as much dignity as I could.

THE END



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